

Advantages to Grazing Stockpiled Fescue

Allison Brown, Livestock Agent, Alexander County

Last month we featured an article on “How to get started stockpiling fescue”. Now let’s talk about the advantages that grazing stockpiled fescue can offer. Grazing stockpiled fescue usually begins mid to late December and provides excellent winter grazing. The highest cost of maintaining a cowherd in the winter months is stored-feed cost, in particular, the cost of feeding hay. Often times it can be difficult to harvest hay at the optimum time. Therefore, stockpiled fescue could offer you a higher nutritional value than hay harvested too maturely. Stockpiled fescue typically contains 12 to 16 percent crude protein and 58 to 65 percent TDN.



Stockpiling tall fescue is also a particularly useful strategy in the management of endophyte- infected fescue. Unfortunately, most of the tall fescue pastures are infected with a toxin-producing endophyte (a fungus that grows within the plant). The toxins are ergot-alkaloids that adversely affect livestock in decreased weight gain, decreased milk production, constricted blood flow (especially to extremities), and decreased reproductive efficiency. These problems are collectively referred to as “fescue toxicosis.” Stockpiled forage from endophyte-infected (E+) tall fescue will still contain these toxins, though the concentration of these toxins will decrease during late fall and through the winter. Thus making this a good feed source for those fall calving herds to carry them through the winter. Next month we tell how you how to determine how many grazing days you have available and how to maximize the available stockpiled forage you have! This will help you plan ahead so that you will know how much hay to have on hand. Stockpiling fescue does not mean you won’t need any hay... just means that you will need less hay. Hopefully a lot less!

Fall Pasture Tips

Phil Rucker, Livestock Agent, Davie & Yadkin County

With the heat and humidity taking everyone’s attention, fall pasture management probably hasn’t made it to the top of many “To Do” lists. Now is the time to make those pasture management plans to help maintain, if not improve your overall forage stand. Here are a few management tips to help your pasture meet your goals.

- I wouldn’t be a good Extension Agent if I didn’t suggest the need to soil test. Know what fertilizer is needed to provide the most bang for your buck. Be efficient with your fertilizer dollar.
- Calculate how much grazing you have left to help you plan your grazing strategies. The cheapest way to feed cattle is grazing. Stretch grazing as far as possible (without damage to the forage stand) before feeding hay.
- Cull any open, geriatric (very old), low producing, bad uddered, bad feet and legs and bad attitude cows that will eat grass your productive cattle could utilize.
- Graze forages to recommended heights and move the cattle. The grass has worked hard for you and needs a rest. Implement a rotational grazing program no matter how complex or simple.
- If you use summer grasses, finish grazing them before turning the cattle onto your cool-season forages. Get all the good you can out of a forage before moving the cows.
- Be careful if feeding stressed forage. Some millet, sorghums, Johnsongrass and some weeds can accumulate nitrates and prussic acid. Contact the Extension Center for information on testing.
- If planning to stockpile fescue, remove cattle mid to late August and apply fertilizer. Stockpiled fescue is an excellent source of nutrition for cattle and helps you save on hay.
- Record what weeds you had as well as what control methods worked or didn’t work.
- You’ll be better prepared for the war on weeds next year.

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Cattle Call



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Winter Feeding Options

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The single biggest expense with cattle production is feed cost. This expense includes both purchased feed as well as that produced on the farm (grain, pasture, and hay). Whatever goes down the throat of the animal is a feed cost.

Winter is the costliest time to keep beef cattle since more stored feeds are consumed then. Now is the time to develop and fine tune your winter feeding plan. The middle of winter is a bad time to learn you're running low on feed. Consider these 10 points as you fine tune your plan.

1. Analyze hay for feeding value. Develop a supplementation program to meet the energy, protein, and mineral requirements for the class of animal(s) you're feeding. Young, growing animals and lactating moms require the best groceries to perform. For \$10, you can discover the quality of your hay, then use the information to adjust your supplement purchase. Don't be afraid to evaluate some commodity feeds such as soy hull pellets, corn gluten, and others. Your local agent can help you sample and interpret the test results.
2. Keep hay or adequate pasture available for cows at all times. When pastures are shorter than 4 inches, provide supplemental hay. When grass is shorter than 4 inches, animals just can't take enough bites of short grass to fill their belly. When their belly is not full, they don't grow as well and they are not able to withstand cold temperatures as well. Be sure to provide enough hay. Making the animals clean up the hay each day before feeding more typically means the boss cow will get all she wants but the more timid animals slowly starve. Putting out enough hay for at least two days keeps this from happening.
3. Record body condition scores on the herd. Keeping up with body condition is a very easy and effective way to monitor how well your feeding program is working. If animals are losing condition, then the feeding program needs immediate evaluation.
4. Make sure there is enough feed for the winter. Some producers know how much hay they need to get through the winter. However, it can be good to calculate this, too. An animal will eat 2.5% of its body weight. For a 1,100 pound cow, this is 27.5 pounds per day. For a 90-day feeding period plus 10% waste, you need 2,700 pounds of hay. Bale weight varies, but the average round bale is about 480 pounds. One 1,100 animal will need almost 6 bales. Remember, some feed hay for longer than 90 days, so be realistic.
5. Separate heifers, thin cows, and old cows from the main cow herd. Separate lactating cows from dry cows. Grouping animals allows for them to be managed for their needs. This keeps some animals from being over fed and others under fed.
6. Re-group cattle during the winter as needed if body condition changes.
7. Cull chronically thin cattle, old cows, and cattle with dental or health problems. Do this now. Don't wait until winter. Also pregnancy check heifers and cows. Cull open animals.
8. Adjust rations as calving season approaches. Provide more energy and protein to meet their increasing needs.
9. Provide minerals at all times. Minerals are essential for optimum animal performance. There are many good minerals on the market. Check feed supplements. Some provide all the minerals required to meet their needs.
10. Provide adequate shelter from wet or cold weather. This does not have to be manmade shelter. A natural shelter, like a wooded area, is adequate shelter for animals with a good winter coat. Animals with a muddy coat are less able to tolerate cold temperatures. Keep mud to a minimum around waters and feeding stations.

Take the time to develop a sound winter feeding plan that will meet both the needs of the animals as well as be cost effective. Working with a nutrition professional or your local Extension Agent will put money in your pocket. And once you have a winter plan, remember #3, body condition score your animals and make changes if needed.

This article was adapted from "A Ten-point Plan for Winter Feeding Beef Cows" by NCSU Beef Specialist Dr. Matt Poore.