



FORAGE FACTS

Publication Series

STOCKPILING TALL FESCUE FOR WINTER USE

INTRODUCTION

Stockpiling tall fescue grass for use during the late fall and winter is a practice that is much lower in cost than feeding hay, has higher nutrition for the grazing animal and greatly improves the grass state of health. If properly planned, this practice is nothing short of outstanding in the fescue growing region of Kansas.

The basic practice is to remove animals from a particular pasture or hay production field in late summer and allow the growth to accumulate until after the cool-season has ended.

Overgrazing often occurs during the summer on fescue as heat and lack of moisture make it impossible for the grass to keep ahead of grazing animals. As carbohydrates are removed from roots to support leaf regrowth, the roots die. Once leaves have grown sufficiently to again trap sunlight, the plant begins to also regrow roots. Going into the winter dormant period with a strong root system results in early, productive growth the next spring. Stockpiling fescue forage starting in early September and continuing through mid-November results in greatly improved plants and high-quality forage for winter utilization. In response to short days and cool night temperatures, tall fescue accumulates a high level of soluble carbohydrates in both leaves and stems. With up to 20 percent of the dry weight of the plant as free sugars, the nutritive quality of fall-grown fescue is quite high. In addition, the heavy, waxy cuticle on the leaves makes the plant more resistant to frost damage than most other cool-season grasses.

To produce a high-yielding stockpile, the pasture should be hayed or grazed or clipped fairly short prior to September 1. At that time, 40 to 60 pounds of actual nitrogen should be applied along with P_2O_5 and K_2O as indicated by soil test. P_2O_5 and K_2O only need be applied once per year—fall is the best time for applica-

tion. Delaying initiation of stockpiling will result in a higher-quality forage but significantly lower yield due to fewer days of growth. Stockpiled fescue can be grazed throughout the winter months. Fall-fertilized fescue will carry protein levels of 12 percent even into February.

Utilization of stockpiled fescues is important. Once cattle are turned into a pasture, considerable waste can occur. In fact, as much as 50 to 60 percent of produced forage can be wasted.

Producers should strongly consider controlled grazing through strip grazing. Start with the first strip closest to the water point, place a single portable electric wire across the area to give a one- or two-day feed supply. The next morning, move the wire forward to the required distance for the next day's feeding. By doing this, the producer can get up to 70 percent utilization of stockpiled forage. Without restricted grazing, producer's can expect only 30 to 40 percent utilization.

Depending upon when stockpiling is initiated, fertilizer rate and fall rains, it is possible in Kansas for 1 acre of fall-grown fescue to meet the needs of a dry 1,000-pound cow or two 500-pound yearlings for 50 to 60 days. Cows will graze through considerable snow as long as ice is not present. Yearlings may need some hay, protein and energy during times of very cold and snowy weather.

Due to the fact that fescue holds its quality, producers should graze crop residues first in the fall and use fescue later in the winter.

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