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Headline: Fall Grazing Programs Utilizing Stockpiled Tall Fescue

WARSAW, Mo. – At this time of year, there are many articles discussing the production of stockpiled tall fescue for fall or winter grazing. One item that seems to be missing is how to manage the stockpiled forage that is produced.

Without a doubt, strip grazing, allowing grazing livestock access small portions of the pasture at a time, is the most efficient way to harvest stockpiled fescue. Restricted access provides greater forage utilization, more even nutrient intake by the livestock, and an extended fall or winter grazing period. In addition, animal concentration is beneficial to disrupt snow cover, should we have late fall snow storms. If steps are not taken to limit access to pasture, much of the forage will be wasted due to livestock trampling and fouling of forage with manure and urine. This results in a shorter fall grazing period, a rapid decline in forage quality, and wasted forage. Too much restriction, however, may limit intake and growth. Therefore, a balance between animal growth and pasture utilization must be achieved.

Deciding how large of an area to graze at any one time is an individual producer decision. Forage can be allocated on a daily basis or up to every two to three weeks. The important thing to understand is that pasture area allocation should be calculated based on expected animal intake, estimated forage availability, desired residual after grazing, and the number of days livestock have access to a particular area. This is not difficult to calculate, and allows for an accurate allocation of pasture area. Adjustments to the allocated area can be easily made by watching how quickly the forage disappears to the desired residual level.

Stockpiled tall fescue forage has high energy and protein values, although these forage quality parameters vary from year to year. Stockpiled tall fescue forage is excellent feed for fall calving cows and thin spring calving cows that have been weaned of their calves. These groups should probably have the first use of stockpiled forage.

Dry, spring calving cows in moderate body condition may likely get too fat if grazing stockpiled fescue forage in the fall months, and an alternative feeding program

has been researched. Stockpiled tall fescue maintains nutrient quality relatively well throughout the winter months, and ergovaline levels decline in toxic tall fescue throughout the late fall and early winter. Feeding hay to dry beef cows in adequate body condition in the late fall, followed by grazing stockpiled tall fescue in the early winter months is one way to manage around the problems associated with ergovaline in toxic tall fescue, and keep adequately conditioned spring calving cows from becoming too fat in the fall.

If weaned calves are grazing toxic endophyte stockpiled fescue, a safe rule of thumb is to expect them to gain about 1 to 1.25 pounds per day. In order to increase gains, additional energy needs to be supplied. Soybean hulls alone or in a mixture with corn or another energy source would be an excellent energy supplement for weaned calves while they are grazing stockpiled fescue. Additional protein supplementation is most likely not needed when calves are grazing stockpiled fescue.

Stockpiled tall fescue is an excellent forage resource. As with any resource, proper management will enhance the value obtained from the use of that resource. Grazing management, particularly with regard to forage allocation, is important in obtaining the most valuable use of stockpiled tall fescue. Forage allocations should restrict forage access, but not restrict forage intake. Delaying the grazing of stockpiled tall fescue until the early winter months appears to be an effective way to avoid many of the ergovaline concerns associated with tall fescue. Knowledge of specific nutritional concerns for your animals will allow the supplementation of appropriate nutrients, whether these be minerals or energy. Observation of both the pasture and animal condition will enhance the effective use of stockpiled tall fescue, and may result in a substantial reduction in winter feed costs.

If you have additional questions about stockpiled tall fescue production and utilization, contact me by e-mail at schmitze@missouri.edu or by calling the Extension Center in Warsaw at (660) 438-5012.

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