ERGOT CONCERNS
I suspect that most of you have heard of ergot. Surely, most of you have heard about fescue endophyte problems. But do you understand the differences and similarity of those two fungi?

Both can be associated with fescue.

Both produce ergot alkaloids that can be injurious to livestock, especially cattle.

The injuries may be lameness, heat stress, poor blood circulation, reduced rate of gain, reproduction failure, etc.

The endophyte, both the novel and toxic varieties, are only visible under a microscope.

Ergot is easily visible to the naked eye. It is the dark, gray-black hard seed-like growth on fescue seed heads. Ergot grows in place of the seed on fescue, ryegrasses, orchardgrass, rye, triticale, wheat and other crops.

Ergot is notable during wet springs and usually appears in southwest Missouri in early June. In 2015 I was especially watchful for ergot in a field I saw almost daily. I first saw the black, mouse-droppings objects on June 9.

Ergot produces several alkaloids that are more potent than the “hot” fescue endophyte which is mainly ergovaline. The chemical structure resembles LSD.

In the past, our concerns with ergot was when fescue seed screenings were intentionally fed to cattle. At first it was believed the fescue screenings had nutritional value. After all, cattle seem to like the seedheads and they strip those seedheads in mid to late May.

As we learn more about the endophyte we know consumption of the stem and seedheads are sources of the toxin, mostly ergovaline. The big question, does the developing ergot produce injurious alkaloids in it’s very early stages?

We’re really not sure at this point but research is being discussed that might help answer that question. We do know that novel endophyte fescue can be a host for ergot.

Testing forages is not cheap for the ergot alkaloids. We may try to work on some special tests to learn of its presence. I welcome any observations you may have regarding fescue problems. I will keep you advised of anything I learn. In the meantime, early clipping of fescue seedheads seems a logical preventive move. Dilute fescue with other forages or grain when they’re on “hot” fescue.

So far, we have not found the silver bullet to avert fescue toxicity symptoms whether from toxic endophytes or ergot. Sure, if you feed enough of that supplement you’re diluting the toxin effects. Alfalfa and other legumes have a beneficial supplemental effect.

FEEDOUT NOT PROFITABLE
Well, it was profitable for one of the 20 entrants. Kunkel Farms, Neosho did have five head of Red Angus steers return a $60.69 profit. The average “profit” was a negative $194.40. Besides the Kunkel steers, the returns ranged from a loss of $18.50 up to a $403.94 per head loss.

Why did the Kunkel steers show a profit? First, they were the lightest steers entered. In November the feeders were at record highs and since the Kunkel steers were set in with a slight discount for being red, their initial value was not as high as the heavier steers. Another thing in their favor was they stayed healthy compared to some groups that had high health treatment costs. Finally, all five carcasses graded low Choice and were Yield Grade 2’s which brought them a $2.50 per hundred premium.

Death loss is always a killer and we had 6 die. We did achieve a 77% Choice quality grade on the survivors. The average rate of gain at 3.22 lbs. per head per day was about
a quarter of a pound under the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity average the past year.

The $194 loss is a far cry from last December’s closeout which hit a $234 profit per head. Back in 2012 and 2013 we racked up some $200 plus losses so cattle feeding is cyclical. If you stay in it enough you’ll probably do a little better than breakeven.

Why do folks enter the feedout? Probably to learn what they could do genetically to improve the feeder calf they raise and market. Some participants have used their steer’s gain and carcass merit to give them talking points when they sell their calves. You’ve heard of reputation cattle, well if you don’t put them on the track, so to speak, potential buyers won’t know if you have performance cattle or just cattle. Remember, there are a lot of average cattle in the country and there are as many below average as there are above average performers.

Where do your cattle stack up? The next feedout begins in early November for your January-April, 2015 calves. Enter 5 or more steers. I won’t guarantee you’ll make money but you will learn something.

STARTING THEM YOUNG
As you can tell, I’m an advocate of finishing a few head of cattle to evaluate what your herd’s genetics are. Four years ago we started a Lawrence County Steer Project for 4-H and FFA members to raise a steer from weaning to slaughter and get gain and carcass data on them.

John Kleiboeker is the leader of the project and although we don’t have large numbers of participants we have had several very educational experiences thanks to the project. The experiences extend beyond the participants to their parents, grandparents and others. The 2015 project came to a close on July 2 with the carcass evaluation on this year’s eight head.

Cloud’s Meats, Carthage killed the steers and Ty Peckman, University of Missouri grad student and assistant meats judging team coach evaluated the carcasses. We do not award ribbons, trophies or cash, we just try to educate. Of the steers, one marbled very nicely and made a Choice plus quality grade. He was solid black, but he did not qualify for Certified Angus Beef. The reason, he had too large a ribeye. CAB does not accept REA’s over 15.9 square inches. This outstanding carcass had a 17.9 ribeye.

At the other end of the quality grade scale we had a steer with very little marbling in his ribeye muscle which dropped his quality grade to Standard. So in the 8 head we had a wide spread in quality grades which would translate into a $25 to $30 spread per hundred carcass value.

Andy Cloud always has insightful comments regarding what he sees as a local beef marketer to his retail customers. He acknowledged the steer with the huge eye muscle would be a challenge to sell to his average customer.

Andy pointed out that in the last three months he’s trying to appeal to some of his customers with “locally grown” wording on pork and beef in his display case. He features a label that asks the question where did this meat come from? At first he thought he’d put Source Verified on the label but his wife thought that sounded a little vague.

The package of beef ribs he showed named the farmer, his address and the fact the animal was raised on corn produced on the farm. In the future he said he likely will just give the county where the animal was raised.

The question was raised about using pictures on the package or in the showcase of the farm where the animal was raised. Also did he feature pictures on Cloud’s website. He said you do need to be careful as he’s had customers state, they couldn’t eat something that they’ve seen its face. Perhaps we’ve gone a little too far in having petting zoos and humanizing animals more as pets rather than food.

OZARK STOCKER CATTLE CONFERENCE
August 1, 9 am until 3 pm is a top-notch event at Harrison, AR. Speakers will be Darrell Peel, ag economist at Oklahoma State; Daniel Scruggs, DVM from Zoetis and Tim Daven of Commodity Risk Management. Tom Troxel, U of A will lead a discussion on making buying and selling decisions and Shane Gadberry, also a U of A faculty member, will discuss leaving money on the table. The cost is $20 payable at the door. For more details visit online at www.uaex.edu.

GRAZING SCHOOLS
Crane Christian Church – September 16, 17 & 18.
Marshfield Holy Trinity Catholic Church - September 22, 23 & 24.

These daytime schools start around 8 to 8:30 am. Contact your NRCS or Extension Centers for details on cost, instructors and subject matter. If you’ve not attended a grazing school, I highly recommend it.