

Spring Pasture Renovation

By Andy Luke, Regional Agronomy Specialist

As we look forward to warmer weather and longer days, it is no secret that the weather this past year has challenged farmers in the area. As a result, many pastures may be in poor condition heading into the growing months. For farmers who have considered renovating their fescue pastures, the poor pasture conditions may make this a great time to move forward with renovation plans.

The vast majority of cattle pastures in our area are made up of Kentucky 31 brand tall fescue. This variety has many excellent growth characteristics that farmer's desire, such as its ability to handle stresses like drought and over-grazing. However, it also costs the Missouri beef industry over \$160 million annually due to fescue toxicosis, a fungal disease that causes reproductive problems and poor weight gain in animals. Although many of our cattle herds are somewhat tolerant to fescue toxicosis, some producers would benefit from pasture renovation with a novel endophyte variety of tall fescue.

For pasture renovation, we recommend the spray-smother-spray method. In this method, the producer will kill their existing stand of tall fescue in late spring, likely in May. They will then plant a quick growing summer annual such as sorghum-sudan or pearl millet that will provide forage or grazing throughout the summer while also smothering any fescue seedlings that emerge throughout the summer. The producer will then spray the field again in the fall to control any emerged seedlings before planting the new forage crop in late August. For new seeding, it is recommended to keep cattle off the pasture for 12 to 18 months. However, it can and should be hayed in the first year following establishment.

For growers who are not interested in renovating their thin pastures, inter-seeding new crops may help with forage production this spring. Annual grasses such as spring oats, wheat or cereal rye can yield 1.5 to 3 tons of forage per acre with an adequate stand. Broadleaves such as turnips, red or white clover or annual lespedeza can also be sown into an existing fescue pasture to provide additional forage. The seeding rate and method will play a large part in determining the stand and forage growth that can be expected from inter-seeding crops into existing pastures.