

Mike's Paddock



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In 2005 I had the opportunity to attend a grazing conference in Roanoke, Va. As the manager of a background grazing operation for

a beef feed lot, I was hoping to find a way that I could increase my dismal average daily feeder grain on Kentucky 31 tall fescue-dominated pastures.

One of the all-time great grass gurus, Dr. Carl Hoveland, was a guest speaker and I was praying that he was going to provide me with the magic bullet to improve my average daily gain.

His opening remark that KY31 cost the beef industry approximately \$1 billion annually didn't do much for my hopes. However, he also said that if it wasn't for KY31, most of the central southeast — the fescue belt — would be almost devoid of ground cover. KY31's ability to survive moderate drought, low fertility and in some cases atrocious grazing management, meant that it was going to stick around.

Unfortunately, KY31 is infected with an endophyte that, while it does a great job protecting the plant from insect and fungal damage, contains toxic alkaloids that cause fescue toxicosis in grazing animals. This leads to raised body temperature, which causes a reduction in dry matter intake, colostrum and milk production — poor calves and poor performing cows.

Tips for stockpiling tall fescue

Tall fescue may have its drawbacks, but with some planning, it can pay dividends as a stockpiled forage for winter feeding by extending the grazing season, minimizing winter hay needs and reducing feed requirements. Below are some tips for managing your tall fescue at key times of the year.

Mid-September:

- Clip or closely graze selected stockpile paddocks to 1,300–1,400 pounds of dry matter per acre
- Wait 10 days for new green growth to occur
- On or near an anticipated rain event, apply 60–80 units of Nitrogen per acre

Late October through early December:

- Measure the amount of stockpiled forage available
- Take a forage sample and have it analyzed for forage quality and nitrate level
- Strip graze daily stockpiled allocation to obtain best utilization
- If grazing dry cows, make sure adequate mineral and supplements are available

An excellent candidate for stockpiling

The shining light for KY31 is that it is an excellent candidate for stockpiling as a late-season feed that can be strip-grazed to provide high-quality forage that rivals high-quality hay without the harvesting costs. Tall fescue (even the new endophyte-friendly varieties) provides a tough sod that allows it to be grazed down to low residuals without affecting the following season's plant population and growth performance. Most high-producing graziers have progressed from KY31 to the new varieties and they have

proven to stockpile just as well. These new varieties have the same benefits of KY31, but the toxic alkaloids have been bred out.

When it comes to feed quality, primarily TDN, I think stockpiled tall fescue has the edge on the rest of the perennial field. Grazed to a low residual — with a low-producing group of lactating cows supplemented with pTMR or a group of dry cows — leave these paddocks in a great condition to be no-tilled with cool season annual forages that provide high-quality grazing for profitable late winter/spring milk production.



Mike's Paddock, cont.

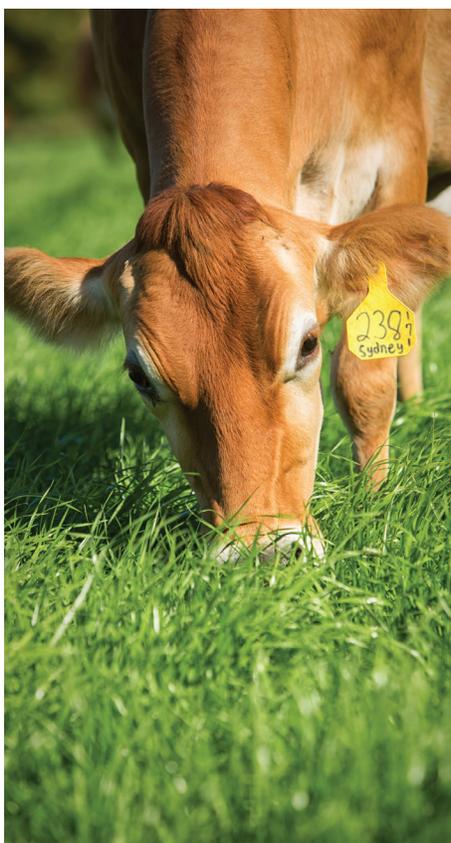
Stockpiling — or deferred grazing as it's commonly called in New Zealand — is nothing new. A common strategy in New Zealand was to drop perennial ryegrass and clover paddocks that required rejuvenation out of the grazing rotation at seed head emergence and leave them until seed drop occurred. While this pasture looked dry and unappetizing, cows in late lactation milked well on it as long as a reasonable residual could be tolerated. Fall rain germinated the fresh seed and the paddock's plant population was restored.

This practice has fallen to the wayside as graziers often tend to rotate a poor-performing paddock to corn for silage, then plant a completely new seed mix in a cultivated seed bed in the fall.

Perennial ryegrass can be successfully stockpiled as well, although it doesn't have the ability to withstand the treading that tall fescue can.

Stockpiling can pay big dividends in winter

With managed strip grazing, a 1,200-pound dry dairy cow can get 60-plus days from one acre of stockpiled tall fescue. This is assuming that available forage is at 2,500 pounds of dry matter per acre (grazing efficiency at 70 percent) and she is consuming 2



percent of her body weight daily.

In summary, implementing a stockpiling program with tall fescue has several advantages to the dairy grazier. It extends the grazing season, minimizes winter hay feeding, substantially reduces stored feed requirements, provides high-quality forage and does not impact the persistence of tall fescue stands. Stockpiling is a strategy that is highly recommended to producers who utilize tall fescue in their forage system.

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