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Should I Stockpile Fescue This Fall?

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Stockpiling fescue for late fall and early winter grazing is a profitable forage management alternative during most years. Stockpiling fescue to accumulate forage growth involves taking your cows off of fescue pasture in late August or early September and applying nitrogen fertilizer for additional fescue forage production. Research has shown that fall stockpiled fescue is of high quality and can be fed at lower cost than traditional southern hay grasses.

Fescue pasture can be managed a number of different ways in the fall: it can be grazed; harvested for hay; or stockpiled for later grazing. The unique production and quality characteristics of fescue allow it to be stockpiled for later use without appreciably compromising quality (crude protein and total digestible nutrients). This management alternative provides both a lower cost source of feedstuff and a higher quality feedstuff when compared to average quality hay which should improve the performance and profitability of your cowherd.

A stockpiled fescue management plan includes these steps:

- Closely graze or mow fescue pasture in late August or early September.
- Apply between 40 to 80 pounds of nitrogen fertilizer before the end of September.
- Keep cows off of fescue pasture until grazing is needed.
- Use some form of controlled or limit grazing management practice.

Depending on the specific farm situation and location, these management practices may need to be adjusted. Also, adequate soil moisture is necessary for a reasonable level of forage production. Consult your local county Extension agent for specific information for your area.

North and central Alabama cattle farmers have basically two options. They can feed hay as has historically been done or provide stockpiled fescue grazing. Let's compare feeding hay versus stockpiled fescue grazing during a 60-day winter feeding program for a 30-head cow herd.

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Our assumptions are:

- 1.11 acres of closely grazed or mowed fescue pasture per mature cow (Sept.).
- 80-pounds of nitrogen per acre (Sept.).
- 60-day winter feeding program (Dec. 15 - Feb. 15).
- 30- head cow herd.
- 35 pounds of hay-equivalent per head per day.
- 2,500 pounds hay-equivalent production per acre.
- 65 percent utilization of stockpiled fescue.
- One-fourth hour per day grazing labor to move fence.
- Use of temporary fencing to implement controlled or limit grazing.

A partial budget is used to allow us to evaluate the alternatives of feeding hay versus stockpiled fescue grazing. In the partial budget, you identify every item associated with the two alternatives that may affect the farm enterprise and then quantify the effect by assigning dollar amounts to each. By simply collecting the revenues and costs for each alternative, a comparison of the two alternatives is possible.

Let's assume the base alternative involves a 30 head cowherd which we expect to feed 35 pounds of hay per brood cow per day for 60 days. The second alternative is to stockpile fescue and limit graze it for 60 days between December 15th and February 15th which uses no hay. The partial budget to evaluate stockpiled fescue alternative involves four categories: items that increase revenue, items that decrease revenue, items that decrease costs, and items that increase costs.

In this example, an item that could increase revenue is a higher weaning weight because the brood cows have a higher level of nutrition from the stockpiled fescue as compared with feeding hay and will wean a heavier calf. Thus, we assumed a 90 percent weaning rate or 27 head multiplied by 15 pounds heavier weaning weight at $.50 per pound (value of gain) which was an additional $203 in revenue. In the second category of the partial budget (decreased revenue), there were no known items that decreased revenue. In the third category (decreased costs), the reduction of hay fed (31.5 tons @ $60/ton) in the amount of $1,890 and hay feeding expenses (31.5 tons @ $5/ton) in the amount of $158 were included. The total decreased cost for reduced hay fed was $2,048. In the fourth category (increased costs), the increased cost items included purchasing and spreading nitrogen fertilizer ($1,230), grazing labor ($120), and temporary fencing ($73). The total increased cost of stockpiling fescue was $1,423. Net returns from stockpile grazing were found by adding the difference of increased revenue and decreased revenue to the difference of decreased cost and increased cost. In this example, net returns from stockpiling fescue equaled $827 for the 30-head cowherd or about $28 per cow.

(Increased Revenue – Decreased Revenue) + (Decreased Cost – Increased Cost) = Net Returns
($203 - $0) + ($2,048 - $1,423) = $827

If your situation is anything similar to the one described here, you may want to give some serious consideration to stockpiled fescue grazing. This forage management alternative can help you save money on your winter feeding program.