

## Stockpiling Tall Fescue for Deferred Grazing

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Tall fescue is a grass adapted to a wide range of growing conditions. It is the best grass for late fall and winter grazing. When used this way, it can effectively reduce livestock wintering cost.

Stockpiling is the accumulation of forage during a period of active growth for grazing after forage growth has stopped. In late fall and early winter, stockpiled tall fescue is leafy, palatable and high in protein, sugars and digestible energy. This provides a low-cost way of wintering dry beef cattle, ewes and stocker cattle held for grazing the following summer.

Stockpiling fescue for winter grazing has to be planned. Due to low light intensity, short days and cool temperatures, little forage growth occurs after mid-October. For high yield and quality, stockpiling should start between mid-July and mid-August. Early stockpiled forage provides high fall and winter yield. If stockpiled before July, quality will be low with yield about the same. Stockpiled yield is determined by the number of days the stand grows, nitrogen application rate and adequate rainfall. Yield varies due to differences in weather, soil conditions and management before stockpiling and during grazing.

Adequate nitrogen increases yield and quality of stockpiled tall fescue. Provide nitrogen by growing fescue with clovers, or by applying mineral fertilizer nitrogen, manure or chicken litter. Fescue needs adequate nitrogen to grow actively, produce proteins and accumulate sugars during the cool fall weather. The accumulation of proteins and sugars makes the fescue more tolerant to freezing and provides a greener, higher quality forage for grazing. Tall fescue fields with only a small amount of legume in them will respond well to nitrogen fertilization if other plant nutrients and soil moisture are available. Nitrogen-fertilized tall fescue withstands freezing weather better than fescue grown with legumes, since legumes do not stand up to hard freezes. Areas of fescue that were fertilized with higher nitrogen rates are typically darker green in color than areas with low nitrogen levels.

When using nitrogen (N) fertilizer, apply 50 to 100 pounds N/acre, depending on the amount of forage desired. Stockpiled tall fescue produces from 0.25 up to 1.0 ton of additional dry matter per 50 pounds of nitrogen applied. Fertilizer nitrogen should be applied soon after stockpiling starts. If using urea (46-0-0), apply it just before a rain to reduce the loss of nitrogen by volatilization. Fescue stands containing 30% or more legume will show little yield increase from applied nitrogen. When legumes are used to provide nitrogen, the fall growth can be lightly grazed to use the legume before it is lost to freezing weather. Weaned calves can make good use of this high-quality legume forage. The grass can then be saved for later use by dry cows (Figure 1). If the legume forage is not used before or shortly after frost, the usable forage yields from tall fescue-clover stands will be reduced.

**Figure 1.** Cattle grazing stockpiled tall fescue in West Virginia.



The nutritional quality of stockpiled tall fescue is adequate for beef cows, stocker cattle and dry ewes, and it is better than much of the hay put up for these animals. When fertilized with 50 to 100 pounds of actual N/acre in July or August, the forage grazed in early December will yield 1,000 to 3,000 pounds DM/acre, containing 11 to 16% crude protein and 60 to 65% digestible energy.

To decrease forage waste and provide uniform animal nutrition, strip graze stockpiled tall fescue. If animals are allowed free access to stockpiled fescue, they will eat only a part of the forage and trample much of the feed into the ground. By providing only what the herd will consume in one to three days, more forage will be eaten and less walked into the ground. One acre of a dense 8- to 12-inch high tall fescue stand will feed 50 to 60 1,200-pound dry cows for one day. In cold weather, forage intake may be higher.

Cattle will graze stockpiled tall fescue through fresh snow up to 8 inches deep. However, if the snow has a hard crust, cattle will require supplemental hay. Sheep learn to paw the snow off stockpiled feed. When managing improved enhanced endophyte tall fescue, leave a 3- to 4-inch stubble at the end of winter grazing to provide vigorous spring growth to ensure long-term stand persistence. Tall fescue stands to be frost seeded with clover should be grazed close (2- to 3-inch stubble height) to encourage frost crystals that incorporate legume seeds into the soil.

Tall fescue is probably the best cool-season grass for use in West Virginia. Wild, toxic fescue can be used successfully when properly managed and provides excellent late fall and winter grazing. The improved enhanced endophyte tall fescues are excellent forages for all classes of livestock at any time of the year. Proper management is the key to using tall fescue.

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