

# Make Plans to Stockpile Fescue to Reduce Winter Hay Needs

*Dr. Mark A. McCann  
Extension Animal Scientist, VA Tech*

Although the first day of summer is not too long passed, it is the time to begin formulating plans for stockpiling tall fescue for grazing in the late fall and winter. This is not a new strategy but one that takes on new meaning as we come to appreciate the new value of hay in a cow-calf enterprise. Minimizing the number of hay feeding days and the amount of hay needed to get through the winter can have major impacts on an operation's bottom line. Many cattlemen have taken advantage of stockpiling fescue as an annual management practice for years; however the current production cost of stored forages emphasize that a greater percentage of producers need to adopt stockpiling as a method to reduce costs.

Many cattlemen have shared that the rains of the early summer have resulted in unplanned stockpiling of forage in their pastures. However the stockpiled forage that offers high quality grazed forage into the winter begins 60-90 days before the end of the fall growing season. That allows each cattleman to determine the typical end of cool season grass growth and count backwards. A good rule of thumb would be early August for northern and western parts of the commonwealth and mid-August for central, southern and eastern portions.

The addition and amount of nitrogen fertilization will have an impact on the amount of forage which can be accumulated. In a review of stockpiled fescue research, Moore et al, 2000 suggested a practical expectation of 10-20 lbs of additional forage dry matter per lb of N. Teutsch, et al, 2005 reported a range 5-13 lb of additional forage dry matter per lb of N in research plots in Blackstone and Amelia. The range in values was related to the form of N used. Ammonium nitrate and ammonium sulfate produced the highest yields. Urea and urea-ammonium nitrate produced the lowest yields and were the N sources most susceptible to volatilization. It was suggested that N volatilization rather than efficiency was the foundation for the differences.

Among the factors to consider beyond growing the added dry matter is how much pasture to set aside. Researchers in Kentucky (Caldwell, et al., 2009) compared 0, 33 and 50% of total pasture area to be stockpiled for fall calving cows. Stockpiled pastures received 60 lb/ac of ammonium nitrate in August. Cow and calf performance was not altered by the proportion of the pasture area which was stockpiled. However, hay consumption was reduced by 33% by stockpiling. The authors suggested that 33% of pasture area was effective to stockpile as winter feed to meet the nutritional needs of fall-calving cows and reduce winter hay needs.

In addition to the production decisions involved in stockpiling tall fescue, there are options available in regard to the grazing of the accumulated forage. Giving cattle access to large areas of stockpiled forage can result in trampling losses and reduced efficiency of harvesting available dry matter. By rationing or limiting access to stockpiled areas such as with strip grazing will improve forage utilization and extend grazing days. More time and management expense is substituted for winter feed costs.

Stockpiling tall fescue is usually a very beneficial management practice. The variation in results and benefits of stockpiling in research trials are greatly influenced by the amount and timing of fall rainfall. While no one has a crystal ball, being attentive to local weather history, seasonal trends and forecast increase the odds of success with a stockpiling program.

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