

THINGS THAT CAN LENGTHEN YOUR FALL GRAZING SEASON

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One of the most expensive parts of a cattle operation is feeding a herd during the winter. More specifically, it is the hay that has to be used when no grazing is available. It isn't unusual for a producer in Tennessee to feed hay for over 100 days during the winter. If they could reduce the number of days hay feeding was needed, they could significantly reduce their expenses for herd maintenance. Here are a few methods to increase the fall and winter grazing season and to decrease hay needs.

Don't overgraze tall fescue during the summer. Tall fescue is a cool-season grass and will grow well during the fall, when moisture and temperature conditions become favorable for forage growth. But if tall fescue is overgrazed, particularly during the summer, its energy reserves will be reduced and it will not be able to produce as much growth during the fall. In order to allow the tall fescue to prepare for strong fall growth, allow the tall fescue to have several weeks to rest and store root carbohydrates.

Stockpile tall fescue in fall. Pastures will start to regrow when fall rains begin and temperatures begin to fall. This will allow fall grazing to begin. One way to increase your fall and winter grazing is to set aside some of the acres of tall fescue and allow them to accumulate until November. Then allow cattle access to the tall fescue. The fall growth of tall fescue will remain relatively high all the way into January and February. You may also want to think about applying up to 60 pounds of nitrogen per acre to increase the amount of the forage produced. Wait to apply the fertilizer until there is adequate soil moisture for plant growth.

Graze the late summer growth of bermudagrass. If you have any acres of bermudagrass, research has shown that, until the bermudagrass turns completely brown, there is adequate forage quality to meet a dry cow's needs. While you are allowing the tall fescue to accumulate, grazing any bermudagrass on the farm will provide early fall grazing.

Seed wheat or rye with brassicas. Wheat, rye and brassicas (turnips) are winter annual crops that can produce significant amounts of fall and winter forage. They can provide additional forage production to allow fall and winter grazing. These are not a replacement for stockpiling tall fescue, but are supplemental. Look for areas that have poor stands of tall fescue or a lot of common bermudagrass. These would make excellent places to seed with these annuals. More info on seeding rates and dates can be found at UTBeef.com

There are no magic bullets to keep from having to feed hay. But in Tennessee we have the right conditions to produce as much or more fall grazing than anywhere else in the nation. But it doesn't happen by accident. Planning to find the right places to seed and stockpile should begin during the summer. A little effort right now can save a lot of time and money during the winter.

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