

Tennessee grazier: Cure the planned-grazing fescue blues

By ALAN NEWPORT

R.P. Cooke says in the southern part of the fescue belt, the better you manage grazing the tougher it gets — at least for a while.



COOKE The Sparta, Tenn., grazier says the benefits that accrue from good grazing management and full recovery of grass before re-grazing also bring with them a new set of problems. Perhaps it's what one might expect, considering the good-grass/bad-grass nature of fescue.

Consider for example, the extension of the grazing season and decrease in the dormant season, which all good graziers experience. With fescue it means your cattle will ingest the endophyte's toxins many more months per year, without a break — obviously a problem.

Add to that the high ambient temperatures and high humidity of the Southern climes, and you've got more months of a fescue toxicity problem.

Eliminate the summer "drought" season that continuous graziers experience every year, replace it with higher soil organic moisture and denser, lush green fescue, and you've got even more fescue toxicosis, Cooke says.

Over the years he has brought his soil organic matter up from 1% or so to about 5%, and he grows grass — fescue, at least — pretty much 12 months of the year. Cooke says he has been "hay-free" for 10 years, and he grazes cattle all year long.

Next, adding to the list of problems is that fescue is a cool-season forage and is often out of balance in protein (nitrogen) to the amount of energy, says the retired vet-



JUST ABOUT RIGHT: This paddock has mostly warm-season grasses and is exactly what grazier R.P. Cooke tries to manage for, since warm-season grasses tend to have a better ratio of energy to protein.

erinarian. This puts excess nitrogen in the bloodstream of the cattle, which acts as mild nitrate poisoning and produces many of the same symptoms as fescue toxicosis.

"High-protein, low-energy grasses lead to high ammonia formation in the rumen," Cooke says. "The ammonia is absorbed and leads to a high pH in the animal, or alkalosis."

However, there are solutions and a way forward, he says.



Cooke has actually written his methods into a series of articles about his 30 years improving his land with grazing and dealing with the fescue issues as they evolve.

He calls it the "Highway 40 Blues" and says these Southern fescue problems persist along a corridor that runs up to 100 miles either side of Interstate 40 from eastern Oklahoma to the Atlantic Ocean.

Cooke nearly every year sponsors

grazing management meetings, sometimes featuring his friend Gordon Hazard, author of the book "Thoughts and Advice From an Old Cattleman," and a man made relatively famous in grazing circles by books and articles written about him by others.

'Fescue junkies'

By way of those meetings and a steady diet of cellphone conversations, Cooke has come to know and share knowledge with grass producers — especially fescue junkies like himself across the nation.

Fundamentally, Cooke says the answers lie in "diluting" that wonderful stand of fescue you've developed with as much warm-season grasses as you can, bringing in the best adapted cattle you can find, eliminating nitrogen fertilizer from your managerial repertoire, and supplementing key minerals and some energy as affordable and effective.

For a more specific list of Cooke's solutions, see the story at right.



CONCOCTION: To correct rumen pH on fescue pastures, Cooke uses a homemade swill that includes molasses, apple cider vinegar and some cooking oil in a carrier like soybean hulls or sawdust. The molasses and oil add some energy, and the vinegar helps lower the protein-elevated pH.

Graze Kentucky 31 fescue using Cooke's 16 management tips

R.P. Cooke has a list of things he's learned about in dealing with "better" fescue that grows up from planned grazing.

1. Dilution is the key to pollution. Fescue needs to make up no more than 35% of the pasture component.
2. Monitor roadsides and try to reproduce what grows there by management in your pastures.
3. Provide forage complete recovery after grazing to increase diversity. The more species the better: grasses, legumes, herbs and forbs.
4. For shade, grow protected small and deep groves of trees. One-wire electric fences will protect these from overuse and trampling when they're not needed.
5. Plan grazing that delivers high animal impact for short periods in the spring. Make a little mud. This sets back the fescue and gives other plants a chance.
6. In high rainfall areas above 35 inches annual average, soil health, plant health and animal health require regular small applications of lime.
7. Supplement cattle with a rumen microbe stimulant, energy, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, lots of loose salt and trace minerals. Clean water is a necessity.
8. Eliminate chemical nitrogen if your fescue is dominating your pasture and "blowing up" in the spring.
9. Consider "overgrazing" areas of heavy fescue growth in early-spring by allowing cattle a longer grazing period or a second grazing period. Do so before the warm-season plants you want begin to emerge.
10. Learn to plan, manage and graze for an increase of the perennial tall warm-season (C4) grasses that grow in your area.
11. Mow the fescue-dominant areas for hay every third year. "I always lose money when we mow hay, but it does set the fescue back," Cooke says. Mowing also decreases soil health and development.
12. Consider applying 4 to 6 ounces per acre of paraquat in late March, April or early May on very dense areas to send the fescue into dormancy. Paraquat is dangerous but short-lived, and seems to hurt fescue worse than it does other plants.
13. Do not bet the farm on novel endophyte fescue varieties.
14. Get adapted cattle genetics. Sell cows that cannot perform in your environment. Do a lot of looking before purchasing. Get out of the truck and look at the grass, the cattle and the feed program. If the seller is feeding hay for more than 60 days per year, do not buy. If there is not a lot of grass, do not buy. If the cows weigh over 1,000 pounds, do not buy. Whenever in doubt, do some more looking.
15. Attend pasture walks in the fescue belt at different times of the year. Take notes, ask questions, think, learn and take action.
16. Do not spend excess money on silver bullets. They do not exist.

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