

Reduce Wintering Cost with Stockpiled Fescue

By Wayne Tankersley

Ever rising input costs have beef cattle producers constantly looking at ways to lower production expenses and maintain profitability. Production budgets show the largest expense category for cow/calf enterprises to be winter feeding costs. Because of this, beef and forage researchers have focused heavily on ways producers can lower this major production expense.

One method of reducing wintering costs touted by forage and beef experts throughout the fescue belt of the U.S. is the use of stockpiled fescue for late fall and early winter grazing. The term “stockpiled” simply means accumulating early fall growth of tall fescue for grazing at a later time; i.e. late fall and/or early winter. The advantages of stockpiling are numerous. Allowing cows to harvest their own forage costs 30-50% less than harvesting the forage as hay and feeding it back to them. In addition, nutrients of grazed forages are usually higher than those in stored forages. Several studies have shown properly fertilized stockpiled fescue forage to contain 12-14% protein and 60% or more digestibility. While the effects of toxicity are not eliminated with stockpiled fescue, toxin levels are usually lower, thus reducing the negative effect on animal production.



Stockpiled tall fescue can reduce beef cow wintering costs by \$100/hd. With a controlled grazing system, one acre of 12” tall stockpiled fescue can support a mature cow for 70-90 days.

Tall fescue is well suited for stockpiling. It weathers well and maintains its nutrient content on accumulated growth. In research conducted at the University of Missouri, beef cattle wintering costs were reduced by \$100/hd by utilizing a combination of stockpiled tall fescue and hay versus when hay alone was used. (See table 1).

To stockpile tall fescue, forage experts recommend that old seed heads and low quality summer growth be removed by clipping or close grazing in mid-August to early September. This stimulates new forage growth high in nutrient content. Depending on the area and weather conditions, nitrogen at 40-80 lbs/A should be applied in late August or early September to optimize fall growth of the fescue. While established stands of fescue and clover

Table 1 - Costs for Alternative Wintering Strategies*

**University of Missouri

	<u>Hay</u>	<u>Stockpiled Fescue</u>
\$/cow/day	\$1.32	\$0.31
Days of grazing	0	90
Days of hay	130	40
Wintering costs \$/hd	\$172	\$70

*130 day winter feeding period from December 1 to April 10

** Summarized by Forage Consultant Jim Gerrish

work well together in a stockpile system, do not attempt to fall establish a new stand of clover in stockpiled fescue. If clover is to be added to the pasture mix, it is best done by frost seeding it in late winter or early spring after the accumulated fescue forage has been consumed.

Grazing Management

To maximize stockpiled forage utilization and effectiveness, a controlled grazing system should be used. Unlimited access to large areas of stockpiled fescue leads to excessive trampling, reduced utilization efficiency and luxury consumption of the forage. Clemson forage specialist John Andrae urges the use of strip grazing to utilize stockpiled fescue forage. He suggests that grazing begin near the water source with a three day supply of forage and then expanding the area out every three days using portable electric fencing. Dr. Andrae’s recommendation of a three day allocation of forage is based on Missouri data showing a 40% increase in grazing days and a 30% decrease in costs when compared to a 14 day feeding strip allocation. Limit grazing cattle for just a few hours each day further increases forage utilization efficiency and extends the number of grazing days. If a controlled grazing system is employed, one acre of 12” tall fescue can support a beef cow for 70-90 days.

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