

MANAGING THE COST OF FESCUE • FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

and reproduction, which can be suppressed by fescue toxicosis. Good fescue management plans start by reducing common stressors present in pasture cattle.

One of the cheapest and most overlooked fescue management strategies in a cow-calf operation is to simply change when calving and breeding occur. By focusing on the timing of breeding and calving to avoid periods of heat stress — June, July and August — we can boost productivity in the herd. For example, moving from February calving to September calving can successfully move the breeding season from May/June to December/January. Some folks weigh this cost differently but if you can navigate markets, opportunity typically exists to change calving seasons at minimal cost with no interruption to cash flow. One small caveat with fall calving is that it takes more harvested nutrients to winter a lactating cow compared to a gestating cow, which results in increased feed cost.

I always hear the phrase “dilution is the solution” when it comes to fescue management. Interseeding legumes can be valuable to reducing fescue toxicity in your herd. The additional cost of seeding legumes in pasture can typically be recouped by reductions in nitrogen fertility requirements. Diversifying species within the pasture also better maintains forage quality and extends the grazing season. Supplementation is another option to dilute the effects of toxic fescue by substituting more digestible nutrients from starch, fiber, or protein while reducing consumption of infected fescue. Supplementation can be used economically in growing calves, but might add too much cost to be a viable solution for cows unless extreme situations exist.

Nutritional additives can help alleviate common symptoms of heat stress. Additives to consider in a mineral program would be vasodilators or probiotics to support gut health. The biggest challenge with additives is they are often times treating the symptoms and don't get to the root cause. Cargill's new Fescue EMT™ Mineral Defense (www.FescueEMT.com) product is the first mineral to take a proactive approach at managing fescue toxicosis by getting at the root cause — the toxin — itself.

Use of rotational grazing or pasture clipping to keep fescue vegetative can also be a good option. Keeping fescue vegetative doesn't necessarily mean cattle are consuming less ergovaline — most all plant tissues contain adequate amounts of the toxin to produce symptoms in cattle — but by keeping it vegetative, we can supply higher quality forage during times when nutrient digestion may be compromised. Rotational grazing appears expensive at first, but with current government programs and larger stocking rates, it typically pencils in as an economical option.

Modifying forage species in a pasture can also be a good option, but it

is probably the most expensive option. Renovating pasture options include planting warm season grasses to rotate cattle on for the summer, or to plant novel endophyte varieties of fescue. The novel endophyte fescue varieties today provide agronomic advantages similar to KY31 fescue in terms of establishment and persistence without the negative effects on animal performance. The challenge with renovating pastures is it can get expensive quickly, and can make it difficult to plan forage inventory while establishing new pastures.

A comprehensive fescue management program takes a lot more effort, but increasing health and productivity means more money in your pocket. If you graze cattle on endophyte-infected fescue, it should be a fundamental part of your business plan.

—Source: Wesley Moore is a beef technical specialist with Cargill Animal Nutrition.



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