

Save Hay with



Winter regrowth in some areas makes stockpiling cool-season fescue a hay- and money-saver.

Story & photos by Becky Mills

With the price of diesel fuel, the thought of putting up hay is enough to give the bravest producer nightmares. Thankfully, if you have fescue you have an option. Stockpiling the cool-season perennial in the late summer or early fall, then letting your cows do the harvesting, can be a huge hay- and money-saver.

“We’re going to increase the amount we stockpile this year. We’ll set aside 120 acres by the first of September,” says Carrollton, Ga., Angus breeder Bill Hodge. “Our goal is to not go back on it until after Thanksgiving.”

He adds, “Even though our costs are going up for fertilizer and the diesel to mow it, stockpiling is still economical.”

To prepare fescue for stockpiling, Hodge starts by mowing it in August.

“We Bush Hog® as close to the full moon as we can get,” he explains, “then we get some degree of weed control.”

Next, he uses nitrogen (N) fertilizer or broiler litter to give the forage a boost. “We take the cattle off after we fertilize and hope for fall rains,” he says.

Hodge, who markets his cattle as grass-finished beef, is going into his third year of drought and at times doesn’t have the luxury of keeping his cattle completely off the fescue set aside from stockpiling. “If I need to, I’ll stock at 200 to 500 pounds (lb.) an acre. With any kind of moisture, you can still stockpile a significant amount of winter grazing. We’d rather have them off, but if we can’t, we can’t.”

He adds, “It is a judgment call. Read your pastures.”

After Thanksgiving, Hodge uses temporary electric fencing to divide the stockpiled fescue into strips and rotates his cattle through it.

“We can go up to 1,500 to 2,000 pounds

► **Left:** Carrollton, Ga., Angus breeder Bill Hodge stockpiles fescue for winter feeding rather than making hay.

Stockpiling

of animal units (AU) per acre,” Hodge says. “With rotational grazing, we can get some regrowth in the winter, probably 25% to 30% of what we got originally. It is enough to get by until early to mid-March, when we really start getting some grass growth.”

Going hayless

Using the system, he is normally able to go hayless, even in the dead of winter.

The stockpiled forage is also surprisingly high-quality. First, the toxic endophyte in the old variety of Kentucky 31 (KY-31) fescue, the one that concentrates in the seedheads and plagues cattle in the warm months, tends to move down lower in the plant when it is cool. Second, fescue just plain doesn't seem to lose quality as it matures in the fall.

“On our most recent test, on a dry-matter basis, stockpiled fescue ran 60.5% TDN (total digestible nutrients) and 11.5% crude protein (CP),” says Jimmy Holliman, director of the Black Belt Research and Extension Center in Marion Junction, Ala.

Holliman actually uses stockpiled fescue as a protein supplement for part of the 150 Angus-Simmental cows at the experiment station. Like Hodge, he divides his stockpiled pastures into small sections, normally five acres within a 25- to 30-acre pasture, and allows 25 cows to graze it for a short time.

“Our rule of thumb is when the first cows start laying down we get them off. That's usually about an hour. We'll let them back on that strip until they've grazed it down to 4

inches (in.) and move them to a new strip.” When they aren't on the stockpiled fescue, they are on dormant pastures with free-choice hay.

“You do have to go out twice a day to put cows on and take them off the grazing, but it isn't that big a deal,” Holliman says. “There is no problem getting them on and off when they learn. The calves will graze it, too. The oldest are 60 days old when we start grazing it.”

He adds, “It is a real good management tool. You really get to see your cows when they walk by you and you can pick up on any problems.”

For comparison

Holliman compared the cows grazing the stockpiled fescue with cows getting soy hull pellets and another group getting whole cottonseed. All three groups got free-choice grass hay. The cows calved in October and November on fescue pastures, then went on the study in December. They stayed on the study for 120 days, through March.

Holliman measured their body condition score (BCS) coming on and going off the study. The cows in all groups averaged a BCS of 6 (1 being emaciated and 9 being obese) at the beginning and end of the study. Their calf weights were also the same. At the time, from 2000 to 2003, there was a 50% cost savings for the group on stockpiled fescue.

On his operation, Hodge says his dry cows actually get fat on the stockpiled forage. He



► Stockpiled fescue provides good-quality winter grazing for Bill Hodge's cattle.

also grows weaned calves and replacement heifers on stockpiled fescue.

Both Holliman and Hodge agree it is one of the best deals going in cattle production. Holliman, who also has his own herd, says, “We've been in two years of drought, and, particularly at my place, I've really been able to stretch my forage with rotational grazing and stockpiling.”

Hodge says, “Cow maintenance is the single biggest cost for a cow-calf producer. Stockpiling cuts those costs. It is a no-brainer.”

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► Under the right conditions, fescue will regrow during the winter.