

SAVE WITH SUMMER STOCKPILING

Gabe Pent, superintendent of the Shenandoah Valley Agricultural Research and Education Center, says summer stockpiling of tall fescue increases days cattle can graze and decreases hay feeding.



Combining summer and fall stockpiling can extend winter grazing by 90 days.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

Savvy cattle producers in fescue country already count on fall stockpiling to increase the grazing season. There is just one drawback: Forage supplies can get pretty tight while saving acres for stockpile or standing hay.

David Fiske, former superintendent of the Shenandoah Valley Agricultural Research and Education Center (SVAREC), who unfortunately passed away in November 2018, solved that dilemma with summer stockpiling.

Fiske started the practice in 2007, and it has been continued by his replacement, Gabe Pent. The combination of summer and fall stockpiling has stretched the grazing season at SVAREC by an average of 90 days, usually into mid-January.

“That means we can graze an

average of 280 days instead of the typical 210 days,” says Pent.

In dollar terms, that’s a \$36-per-cow savings by grazing rather than feeding hay. Last year, the SVAREC team beat the average.

“Hay is \$120 a ton if you’re buying it. In 2018, we estimated we saved \$1.37 per head per day in feed costs for 70 days. That’s \$96 a head,” Pent says.

Proving ground

While the experiment station has around 500 acres of pasture, predominately Kentucky 31 (KY-

31) tall fescue, Pent and his crew use eight paddocks of 2 acres each for the stockpile study. They keep eight of their 180 Angus-cross cows on those 16 acres year-round, and practice both summer and fall stockpiling, as well as rotational grazing, depending on the season.

They start the summer stockpiling process in the spring, usually in mid-April, when tall fescue typically begins to produce an overabundance of forage in their area. They take cattle off 25% of the pasture — or in this case, two paddocks — and let it grow. In mid-August, they let the cattle back on the forage they stockpiled. At that point strip-grazing, using a single strand of temporary electric fence to portion out two to three days of grazing, is the management tool of choice.

Augusta County Extension Agent John Benner has conducted on-farm demonstrations with summer stockpiling.

“You’ll have a lot of mature growth, but there is a significant amount of undergrowth that is green and lush,” he says. “To get effective utilization, you’ll need to force the cattle to eat the old growth. A high grazing density, measured in pounds of beef per acre, will do that.”

Whether strip-grazing at SVAREC or the on-farm demos, back-fencing, or fencing out the forage already grazed, is generally not used. “There is extra labor with back-fencing, and it is a little more difficult to provide water,” says Benner.

Pent adds, “The forage may not recuperate as quickly without back-fencing, but these stands have recuperated fine the following year.”

With their demonstrations on-farm, Benner says, they aimed for around 60,000 pounds (lb.)

of cattle per acre for two to three days before they moved them to a fresh strip of stockpiled forage. That's about 50 1,200-lb. cows, or 30-40 cows with a calf, he notes.

He says when they used a lighter stocking rate, the cattle did more selective grazing and wasted more forage.

The mature forage is a case of pretty is, pretty does.

"It is better than what you think, looking at it," says Benner.

At 54%-59% total digestible nutrients (TDN), he says, "It will support a dry or lactating cow. It is about equivalent to well-made first-cutting hay."

Pent adds that he hasn't seen any additional problems in the cows from the toxin typically found in KY-31 tall fescue, even though the toxins tend to concentrate in the seedheads.

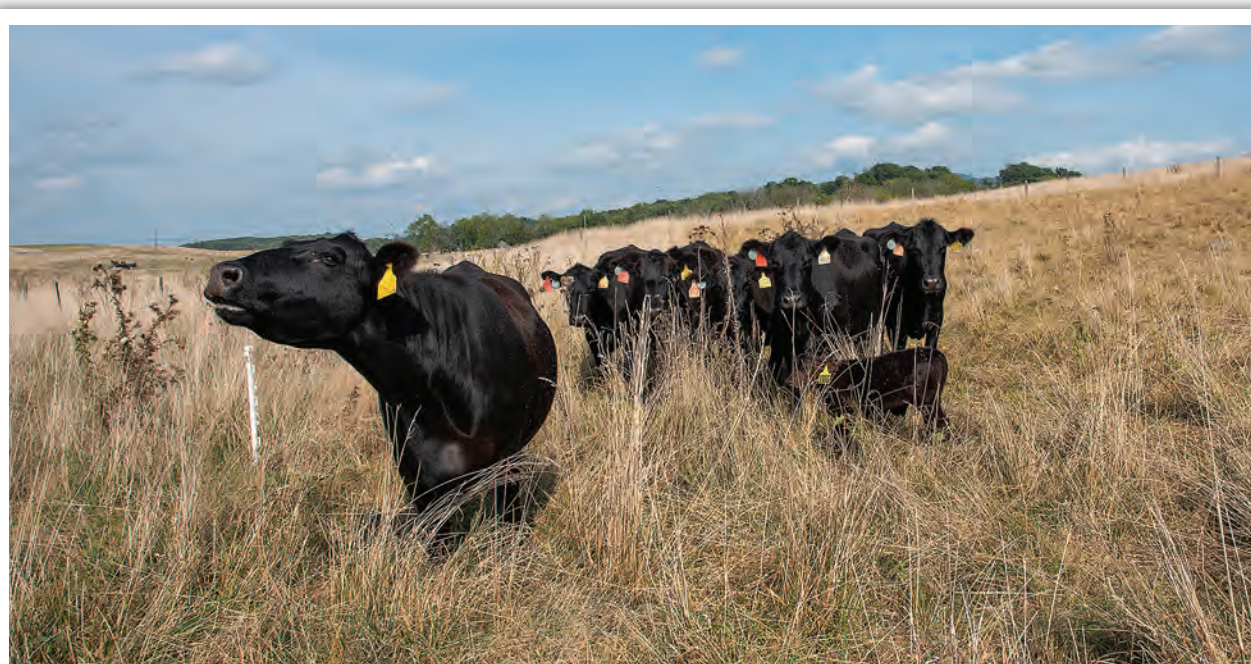
"By the time the cows get in the stockpiled fescue, some of the seed is shattered, and the alkaloids degrade over time." He adds, however, "I'm concerned about the forage in general, but not the seedheads specifically."

At the SVAREC, while the cows are benefiting from the summer stockpile in August, September and on into October, the cattle crew applies nitrogen (N) to another 50% of their paddocks and sets them aside for fall and winter stockpiling. When the summer stockpiling runs out, the fall stockpile is ready to strip-graze.

Cautions

It sounds like the perfect system. However, like almost any practice, there can be drawbacks. In September, Pent says, "we're in the middle of calving season, and we weigh, tag and castrate bull calves at birth. It is hard to find the calves in the tall grass, and with strip-grazing, the calves go under the single strand of wire."

Benner adds, "You're giving up a spring hay cutting, or a growth flush in the spring you can use then. If you're giving up the hay cutting, you don't have an extra row of hay bales you can feed at any time. If you have a long



Cows at the SVAREC meet their nutritional needs by grazing summer stockpile of tall fescue, rather than eating hay.



When their dams are on summer-stockpiled tall fescue, calves can be hard to find.

Fescue rescue

Gabe Pent manages the toxic fungus found in most Kentucky 31 tall fescue by frost-seeding red and ladino clover and by stockpiling forage so part of the alkaloids degrade. However, it is still a concern for the superintendent of the Shenandoah Valley Agricultural Research and Education Center (SVAREC). The endophyte can keep cattle from shedding their winter coat, and [it] constricts their blood vessels, contributing to heat stress. In severe cases, their hooves and tails can slough off; and it can cause a decrease in gain, fertility and milk production.

The good news is the Alliance for Grassland Renewal is putting on a series of workshops across the Fescue Belt this spring. While there are no quick, easy and cheap solutions, there are options, including establishing novel endophyte tall fescue varieties. These varieties contain the endophyte that gives fescue its hardiness, but it doesn't cause negative effects in animals.

For more information, and to find a workshop near you, see: <http://grasslandrenewal.org/education.htm>.

winter, you may miss that hay."

He also says it requires some management. It is possible without strip-grazing; but to get effective utilization, strip-grazing is required.

Pent adds, "It is doable for those who are already rotationally grazing and doing fall stockpiling. They already have the skills to do it."

Even with the potential challenges, Benner and Pent agree summer stockpiling is a worthwhile practice.

"You have a significant amount of forage you can graze in late July and early August, when there is usually not much other forage to be found," says Benner. "You're also providing supplemental forage without having to put in a summer annual."

Pent says, "Feeding cattle is the most costly part of a cattle operation. Here in Virginia, it is 50% to 70% of the total cost. Grazing is significantly cheaper than feeding hay. The longer we can graze and let animals harvest the forage, the better."

For more information on summer stockpiling, see <http://ext.vt.edu/agriculture/graze-300.html> and click the link Graze 300 VA video series. ■

Editor's note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlewoman from Cuthbert, Ga.