

Dalton Bennett relies on rotational grazing to try to lessen the harmful effects of the toxin in Kentucky 31 fescue.



Working Around Tall Fescue

Virginia producer uses alternate forages to help with fescue's challenges.

Story & photos by
BECKY MILLS, field editor

Dalton Bennett is all too aware of the negative effects of the endophyte that lurks in Kentucky 31 tall fescue. The majority of the 1,200 acres of permanent pasture at Knoll Crest Farm is made up of the forage.

Still, the Red Hill, Va., cattleman says, "I like having it. Tall fescue will grow; it's tough. We couldn't raise cattle here if we didn't have it."

However, he states, "Animal performance is a huge deal to us." That's where the endophyte shows its nasty side, hampering gains in growing cattle, dropping fertility and milk production

in cows, and, especially noticeable in the South, making cattle more susceptible to heat stress.

As a result, Bennett puts a great deal of time and effort into making sure the cattle don't have to rely solely on fescue. Armed with a Virginia Tech degree in crop and soil science, the 27-year-old Angus breeder, along with his father, Jim, and uncles Brian and Paul, has been adding to the forage menu since he joined the family operation full-time in 2013.

Sorghum benefits

Forage sorghum for silage was his first winner. He planted it in 30-inch (in.) rows and watched it grow.

"We made more feed, and the cost was so much lower, so we made more with less."

— Dalton Bennett

"It was a home run," he says. "We made 1.6 loads (close to 13 tons) per acre of corn silage and 2.2 loads (almost 18 tons) per acre of sorghum silage. We made more feed, and the cost was so much lower, so we made more with less. In business, that's what you need to do."

The added production wasn't the only

benefit, Bennett says. "It will wait for moisture."

In 2017, they had a field that only had 3 in. of rain the entire season and was hit by sugarcane aphids, but it still made 12 tons an acre.

He also says the feed value is more than acceptable.

"Forage sorghum is a very close second to corn silage," he explains. "It is higher in protein than corn silage by about two points, but it is lower in TDN (total digestible nutrients)."

Bennett says their sorghum silage tests at around 10%-11% crude protein (CP) and 68% TDN, compared to their corn silage at 9% CP and 74% TDN.

(Continued on page 50)

Working Around Tall Fescue (continued from page 49)

They use sorghum silage for their young bulls when they go on feed, and to the fall-calving cows during calving and breeding season.

Grazing preference

For grazing, his go-to summer annual is sorghum-Sudan.

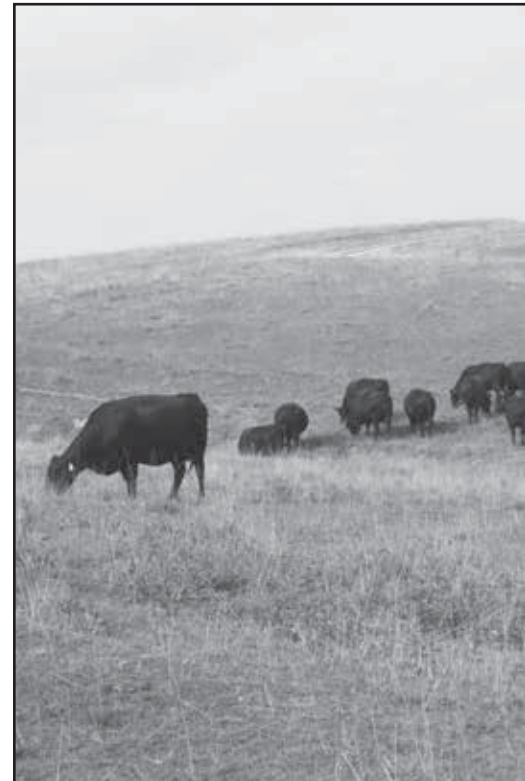
“We no-till 60 acres. It has worked phenomenally,” Bennett says. In 2016, when they had adequate rain, he grazed cattle on it three times. In 2017, when they were dry, he was only able to graze it twice, but a later-than-usual frost meant he was able to graze it later in the fall.

Bennett adds, “The drought tolerance

of sorghum is amazing.” He is also impressed with the quality. “While I was at Tech I heard of a brown midrib (BMR) sorghum and sorghum-sudex. That has changed the game as far as quality goes.”

Auburn University extension animal scientist Kim Mullenix agrees.

“In recent years, with the introduction



of the BMR varieties, there has been an improvement in quality in sorghum-Sudan,” Mullenix says. “It averages between 60% digestibility and 75%, with early growth over 70%.”

Bennett’s favorite sorghum-Sudan is a BMR brachytic dwarf variety.

“It doesn’t get extremely tall and has less stalk, but just as many leaves as taller varieties,” he says, adding that it can also tolerate close grazing.

To try to graze it at the optimum stage, he puts cattle on the first time



The cattle at Knoll Crest Farm have to adapt to grazing tall fescue.

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7061	HA Cowboy Up 5495	Mercoer Vanguard 751	6	0.5	54	101	18	-2.67	42.48	135.07
7042	HA Cowboy Up 5495	S A V Final Answer 0035	11	0	67	117	17	-5.51	58.18	109.75
7054	Kougal Advance 28	HA Windy 3410	8	-1.4	61	102	28	-17.94	60.39	104.68
7055	Kougal Advance 28	SITZ Logic Y46	11	-0.1	56	97	28	-15.77	58.85	103.22
7065	Kougal Advance 28	G A R Predestined	11	-1.2	62	105	29	-16.21	66.23	115.6
7071	Kougal Advance 28	KCC Warner Wall Street 1666	9	-1.2	62	99	29	-14.38	68.5	99.58
742X	Kougal Advance 28	KCC Right Time 57	11	-0.2	64	101	29	-13.89	73.8	95.08
760X	Kougal Advance 28	S A V Bannock 5662	8	-1.7	60	112	30	-25	98.84	137.27
767Y	Kougal Advance 28	KCC Right Time 57	13	-1	68	107	31	-19.81	79.71	113.99
791Y	Kougal Advance 28	KCC Right Time 57	10	-0.8	61	102	28	-17.94	61.18	102.18
796Y	Kougal Advance 28	KCC Warner Wall Street 1666	11	-1	62	107	29	-21.45	62.23	103.98
7156	Brans Thunderbolt 963	Sitz Upward 10496	6	-1.1	57	99	30	-19.29	57.41	125.43
7010	Connely Guinness	Connely Courage 25L	9	-1.1	56	100	28	-14.45	51.91	119.36
7010	Connely Guinness	SITZ Logic Y46	2	-2.4	55	100	28	-17.07	48.95	123.62
7019	Connely Guinness	S A V Final Answer 0035	7	-1.1	55	97	30	-15.85	58.4	116.58
7024	Connely Guinness	KCC Lush Box 9740	4	-1.8	57	94	26	-11.85	54.38	108.18
734Y	Connely Guinness	S A V Final Answer 0035	7	-1.1	56	97	31	-17.14	63.18	119.14
7459	Connely Guinness	Rio 2BR4 of Rio 6K20 BW	6	-1.4	58	97	32	-18.85	60.44	104.79
754Y	Connely Guinness	S A V Final Answer 0035	7	-1.5	61	110	21	-4.32	57.46	149.23
6266	Sitz Final Statement 8624	Sitz Upward 10496	11	-0.3	64	116	31	-26.12	63.15	129.36
7042	Sitz Final Statement 8624	SITZ Logic Y46	9	-0.1	52	104	27	-17.5	45.65	105.89
1026	Sitz Final Statement 8624	S A V Registry 2631	10	-0.5	57	106	27	-18.38	53.76	115.48
7073	Sitz Final Statement 8624	KCC Upward 328X	8	-1	61	111	30	-24.56	59.86	127.49
1085	Sitz Final Statement 8624	KCC Game Day 2501	7	-0.9	57	104	26	-16.19	52.19	125.28
7136	Sitz Final Statement 8624	KCC Game Day 2501	8	-0.5	56	101	27	-16.19	54.55	119.81
1143L	Sitz Final Statement 8614	KCC Right Time 0742	10	-0.3	65	114	26	-20.61	61.05	124.14
6036	Misgrave Big Sky	HA Windy 3344	3	-3.7	57	95	25	-12.72	44.77	112.77
1030	Misgrave Big Sky	Rio 2BR4 of Rio 6K20 BW	10	-0.1	61	97	27	-14.45	56.26	88.86
7094	Misgrave Big Sky	KCC Game Day 2501	6	-1.9	57	93	25	-10.13	53.81	103.67
7745	Misgrave Big Sky	Rio 2BR4 of Rio 6K20 BW	12	-0.4	51	93	26	-10.77	50.51	120.6
783Y	Misgrave Big Sky	KCC Right Time 57	9	-0.8	62	108	26	-16.24	61.47	124.69
1000	Gaffney Game Time 370	SITZ Logic Y46	7	-4	58	104	26	-16.05	51.01	123.76
7021	Gaffney Game Time 370	SITZ Logic Y46	7	-1.9	53	99	31	-16.22	54.07	128.67
1000	Gaffney Game Time 370	SITZ Logic Y46	11	-0.9	56	100	27	-16.82	58.88	130.56
7069	Gaffney Game Time 370	S A V Registry 2631	5	-2.4	56	96	23	-8.86	47.97	122.02
7136	Gaffney Game Time 370	KCC Right Time 0742	3	-2.7	60	97	24	-10.57	51.68	108.93

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While the end of the grazing season for sorghum-Sudan is a concern, the start of the season is spot on for producers in fescue country. It comes when the heat stress effects of tall fescue are the worst.

“We graze and kill the winter annuals,” Bennett says, “then we plant on or before June 1, no-till. This past year we went on the sorghum-Sudan in mid-July, but we have grazed on July 4.”

“We get the best bang for our buck with the spring calvers, especially in a young herd. The calves are getting big and

the cows and calves can eat it.”

If he ends up with extra sorghum-Sudan, and a promising window of fair weather, he’ll bale it.

“It may take four days in the summer to put it up, we have to run it through the tedder twice and make sure to fluff up the

(Continued on page 52)

when it is about 10 days away from heading out, or around chest high. He’ll take them off when they graze it down to 2 in. in height, then lets it grow until it is about waist high before re-grazing it. If there is enough moisture to get regrowth, he’ll get in a third grazing.

However, he says, “I don’t play around with prussic acid poisoning.”

Mullenix says that is a valid concern because sorghum species are susceptible.

Prussic acid poisoning occurs when



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Working Around Tall Fescue *(continued from page 51)*

windrows so the air can move through them, but it sure makes some really good hay," he says.

"We try to feed it to the fall-calving

Left: Dalton Bennett uses rotational grazing to lessen the toxic effects of endophyte-infested tall fescue.

cows when they first start calving, maybe as early as September. It is very palatable, and it sure beats fescue."

The sorghum-Sudan, along with his winter annual mixes, are produced in what Bennett labels his annual grass factories.

"These are old crop fields. They're small, and most of them don't have water," he says. "It is good land, too good to be permanent pasture. Now we can produce a lot of feed with minimal effort."

He points to a field road snaking up a hill.

"This road had cuts in it so deep you could lose a truck in them," Bennett says. "We'd haul a tractor, disc mower and a baler six-tenths of a mile so we could hay. It didn't make sense. We have the potential to graze two or three groups of

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AVF EMBLAZON 1097 – He sells.
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CED +8
BW +2.3
WW +65
YW +113
Milk +19
MB I+.37
RE I+.53

AVF EMBLAZON 0367 – He sells.
Sire: LD Emblazon 999 • Dam's sire: SAV Bismarck 5682



CED +0
BW +3.4
WW +76
YW +127
Milk +24
MB I+.12
RE I+.64

AVF RENOWN 3037 – He sells.
Sire: SAV Renown
Dam's sire: SAV Bismarck 5682



CED +5
BW +2.8
WW +51
YW +87
Milk +24
MB I+.12
RE I+.43

AVF SEEDSTOCK 2157 – He sells.
Sire: SAV Seedstock 4838
Dam's sire: SAV First Class 0207



CED +1
BW +4.1
WW +64
YW +111
Milk +24
MB I+.19
RE I+.42

AVF SEEDSTOCK 8387 – He sells.
Sire: SAV Seedstock 4838
Dam's sire: SAV 8180 Traveler 004



CED -2
BW +3.8
WW +67
YW +113
Milk +25
MB I+.62
RE I+.50

AVF PAYWEIGHT 4277 – He sells.
Sire: Basin Payweight 1682
Dam's sire: Buford AVF All Purpose 4700



CED +7
BW +1.8
WW +72
YW +124
Milk +22
MB +.39
RE +.77

AVF EMBLAZON 2686 – He sells.
Sire: LD Emblazon 999
Dam's sire: Connealy Final Product



CED +6
BW +3
WW +64
YW +106
Milk +26
MB +.38
RE +.46

AVF PAYWEIGHT 8566 – He sells.
Sire: Basin Payweight 1682
Dam's sire: HSAF Bando 1961



CED +13
BW -6
WW +69
YW +119
Milk +25
MB +.32
RE +.65

AVF EXCITEMENT 8826 – He sells.
Sire: Basin Excitement
Dam's sire: SAV Final Answer 0035



CED +4
BW +3.4
WW +67
YW +121
Milk +29
MB +.22
RE +.67

AVF ADVANCE 4736 – He sells.
Sire: Koupal Advance 28
Dam's sire: SAV Resource 1441



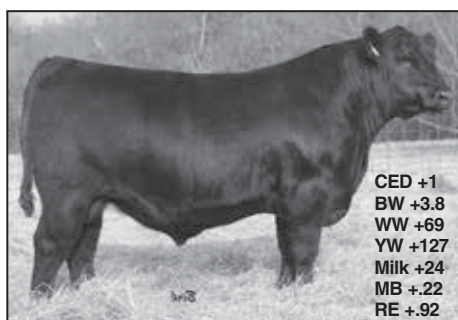
CED -1
BW +3.5
WW +65
YW +122
Milk +20
MB +.27
RE +.65

AVF RESOURCE 3476 – He sells.
Sire: SAV Resource 1441
Dam's sire: SAV Angus Valley 1867



CED +4
BW +1.5
WW +66
YW +108
Milk +19
MB I+.31
RE I+.45

AVF RENOWN 9297 – He sells.
Sire: SAV Renown 3439
Dam's sire: SS Objective T510 0T26



CED +1
BW +3.8
WW +69
YW +127
Milk +24
MB +.22
RE +.92

AVF RESOURCE 3516 – He sells.
Sire: SAV Resource 1441
Dam's sire: SAV Angus Valley 1867



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Dalton Bennett plants summer annuals to give his cattle a break from fescue.

cows on the field and, if it needs grazing, it is easy to move them on it. I would rather graze it than harvest it. I like driving tractors, but diesel is expensive."

They still have to move equipment to the annual grass factories, but not as much as when they were haying them regularly.

"We drill in seed twice a year, we spray once a year, and we fertilize twice a year," he says. "It makes more sense in my mind to do it this way."

Along with sorghum-Sudan in the warm season, Bennett plants winter annual mixes of barley, marshal ryegrass, crimson clover and turnips, or, last year, triticale, crimson clover and Austrian winter peas. Whether he grazes the winter annuals or chops them for silage depends on the weather and cattle needs. This past spring, they needed stored feed.

"We chopped it in mid-April and

(Continued on page 54)



Working Around Tall Fescue *(continued from page 52)*

made two loads (16 tons) per acre," he says. "We planted forage sorghum behind it and made 2.5 loads (over 16 tons) per acre. We produce a lot of feed on a small number of acres, and it amounts to being able to graze more land."

Triticale is gaining on barley for their winter silage crop.

"It is higher-quality," Bennett says. Both small grains are taking the place of corn silage. "Since I came back, we pulled back on corn silage. We can count on small grains consistently year after year."

No matter how carefully he manages the forages, there are seasonal gaps, so he and his crew also put up hay and haylage. The hay is usually orchard grass and clover, although they do make some fescue hay.

Between their stored forage and winter and summer annual grazing, the Knoll Crest cattle do get breaks from fescue. However, Bennett also depends on management to keep the effects of the toxic endophyte to a minimum.

"We do a lot of rotational grazing. We try not to let seedheads form in the spring, but the pastures do get away from us." He also tries to make sure to move cattle off fescue before it gets below 4 inches in height. Recent research from Missouri suggests there is a greater concentration of the toxic endophyte in the lower part of the plant than previously thought.

Plus, Bennett says, "We want to have good plant regrowth and soil health."

The Knoll Crest crew also culls cattle that don't shed out in the spring and those that suffer more from fescue-induced heat stress.

"We do cull on hair coats," Bennett emphasizes. "It goes hand in hand with fescue toxicity. Fescue is what our cattle have to do on and what our customers' cattle have to do on."



Editor's Note: *Becky Mills is a cattlemaster and freelance writer from Cuthbert, Ga.*



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