



Market cows grazing Kentucky 31 fescue showed a positive return at harvest.

# TWO NEGATIVES

# MAKE A POSITIVE

In Kentucky, open cows on Kentucky 31 fescue add up to profits in this strategic grazing, marketing program.

*Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor*

**M**ore than likely, you wince at preg-check time when you hear the dreaded “O” word. Plus, you’re probably not too proud of your Kentucky 31 (KY-31) fescue pastures, especially in the summer when the toxic endophyte in the forage wreaks havoc on a cow’s ability to cool herself. However, in a two-year study, the folks at Eden Shale Farm, in collaboration with researchers at the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Forage-Animal Production Research Unit, Lexington, Ky., grazed market cows on KY-31 fescue, in the summer no less, and ended up with a \$117-per-head profit in 2018 and \$192-per-head profit in 2019.

Dan Miller, industry coordinator for Kentucky Beef Network (KBN), an arm of the Kentucky Cattlemen’s Association, headed

up the study. He bought 24 market cows from area stockyards in mid-May, brought them to Eden Shale, which is managed by KBN,

dewormed and weighed them, and took body condition scores (BCS).

Next, he divided them into six groups of four cows each. In all six paddocks, KY-31 fescue was the predominant forage, but they also included orchard grass and bluegrass. In two paddocks, red clover was overseeded in February 2018. There was still a 20%-30% stand in 2019. In another two paddocks, Chaparral™ herbicide was applied in May both years to suppress fescue seedheads and knock back broadleaf weeds. Two paddocks were left as they were to serve as controls.

Miller, with help from Greg Cole, manager of the Owenton, Ky., operation, rotated the cows every five to seven days to different paddocks, but kept them in the same treatment groups. They weighed the cows every 21 days.

## Forage focus

In the meantime, USDA ARS Research Associate Brittany Harlow and Research Technician Tracy Hamilton kept watch on the forage.

“We took pasture composition measurements and forage availability readings, as well as looked at nutrient composition,” says Harlow.

The researcher says the addition of red clover was not a random choice.

Red clover improves pasture quality, but also contains isoflavones. Harlow says isoflavones have been shown to counter some of the negative effects of fescue toxin.





Brittany Harlow says the isoflavones in red clover help counter some of the negative effects of the toxin found in fescue.



Above: Tracy Hamilton says the key to seeding red clover is to get the grass grazed down low.

Hamilton adds, “We seeded 5 to 8 pounds (lb.) of red clover seed per acre the first year. The key is to get the grass grazed down low so you get good seed-to-soil contact. If you have a lot of thatch built up, it doesn’t work too well.”

The team used a broadcast spreader and a tractor or four-wheeler to do the seeding.

As for the addition of the herbicide to the study, Harlow says, “Seedheads have the highest concentration of the ergot alkaloids in tall fescue and that’s what causes fescue toxicosis. Suppressing the seedheads also helps because it keeps the forage vegetative.”

Hamilton notes, “The second year we used 2 ounces of Chaparral per acre for general

broadleaf control. It worked really well. At higher rates, it turns the fescue yellow and stunts it.”

“Typically, when we’re walking through the pasture, we see mostly fescue. But by doing fescue suppression, we open up the pasture for other grasses like bromegrass. Cattle really like it and will selectively graze it, especially if you put them on early.”

He adds, “Most farmers don’t want to spray for weeds because it kills the clovers, but you get where you have more weeds than clover. A good management strategy, if you want to incorporate clovers and use Chaparral for seedhead suppression, is to graze the clovers for two good years, then as weeds are increasing, use Chaparral the third year. Use it on half your farm, or whatever works. Then, after two years, when you have weeds suppressed, frost-seed with clover.”

At the end of the study, Miller found that the addition of both red clover and Chaparral to the grazing system improved gains and BCS of the cows. In 2018, the cows weighed an average of 1,176 lb. at

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Left: Red clover is planted in the fescue at Eden Shale Farm, Owenton, Ky.

Below: At Eden Shale Farm, Dan Miller and Greg Cole rotated market cows to fresh forage every five to seven days.



With grazing management and value-added marketing, Dan Miller was able to get a positive return on market cows.





the start of the 90-day trial and 1,334 lb. at harvest, for an average of 2.3 lb. per day. In 2019, they weighed 1,056 lb. at the start and 1,267 lb. at harvest for an average of 1.6 lb. per day. Both years, they also increased 0.9, or close to 1.0, in BCS.



Dan Miller took weights and a body condition score on market cows every 21 days during a 90-day grazing trial.

profit. It isn't much different from a stocker operation. Typically, cows are cheapest in late winter and bring the most around July 4. If you have a cheap source of feed, and can buy them in the late winter and sell in the summer, it can be profitable. You also need to buy higher-quality cows to have

success. If you buy lower quality, you may have some death loss."

Between good-quality cows, managed grazing and a profitable market in the form of Beef Solutions, Miller says, "We made money on every animal." ■

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

### Finding a market

When it comes to marketing the cows, Miller says he had the advantage of Beef Solutions (see sidebar).

"I know I'm going to get what they're worth," he says.

If you don't have a promising market for cows, he says, "You may have to rely on timing to make a

### Beef Solutions is a market booster

In 2017, Kentucky consumers told Kroger's meat merchandisers they wanted a local ground beef product. At the same time, Kentucky cattle producers wanted more for their market cows. The result was the March 2018 kickoff of Beef Solutions LLC, whose one member is the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association.

Beef Solutions sets the price based on the high dressing boner prices on the Kentucky Weekly Livestock Summary generated by the Monday USDA reports. Cattle are delivered and harvested to The Chop Shop, a commercial packer in Hazel Green, Ky., on Fridays.

Producers are paid on hot carcass weight (HCW), minus the cost of the tag, which is \$1.50, and the \$2-per-head state and national beef checkoff. They are also responsible for transportation costs to The Chop Shop.

Becky Thompson, Beef Solutions, says producers who supply market cows for the program estimate they average around \$150 a head more by selling on HCW rather than a live per-pound price. "We've paid an average HCW of \$1.19 a pound," she notes.

The beef itself is top-notch, a whole carcass grind from open cows.

"We have gotten very, very good feedback from the consumers," says Thompson. "We grind what would be steaks into one product."

Kroger prices it at \$5.99 per lb., and an everyday price of \$4.99 per lb., which Thompson says is competitive with similar products, such as Laura's Lean Beef, but above generic ground beef.

In less than two years, the program has already grown from harvesting eight open cows a week to 17, with more growth in the works.