

# Fescue Fixes

When 600-pound (lb.) stocker calves top \$1.30 per lb., it's a good time to consider lost gains from grazing beef animals on infected tall fescue pastures, says University of Missouri (MU) Forage Specialist Craig Roberts.

In Missouri grazing trials, steers grazed on pastures with high levels of endophyte gained almost 1 lb. a day less than steers on low-endophyte pastures. Losses in daily gains across the "fescue belt" — an area stretching from northern Missouri to West

Virginia, from Georgia to Texas — range from ½ lb. to almost 1 lb. per day.

"As a rule of thumb, steer gain decreases a tenth of a pound per day with every 10% increase in infected plants in a pasture," Roberts says. "With what we know about how to manage around tall fescue toxicosis, no producer should tolerate those kinds of losses."

## The stats

Tall fescue is the most widely grown grass in Missouri and helps to maintain the state's No. 2 rank in beef cow numbers in the nation. Fescue is also grown across a wide swath of the temperate zone through the Ohio River valley to the East Coast.

Much of that fescue is Kentucky 31 (KY 31) variety, which contains toxic levels of an alkaloid produced by an endophyte fungus living in the grass.

In addition to reducing daily gains, toxins cut milk production; reduce reproduction; cause "gross symptoms" such as fescue foot, lost feet, tails and ears; and create shaggy hair coats that won't shed in summer. If cattle are standing in ponds to cool their feet, they are probably suffering from fescue toxicosis, Roberts says.

"There is no cure for fescue toxicosis," says Roberts, who works with other state forage specialists to raise awareness of the problem. "There are, however, proven management strategies that can lessen the effect of fescue toxicosis." Those include replacing the toxic fescues with endophyte-free fescue or fescue with beneficial endophytes, interseeding other forages to dilute the toxins, rotating livestock to nontoxic pastures, supplementing the diet, controlling fescue seedheads, and more.

"Most of these practices limit the amount of toxin the animal eats," Roberts says.

Roberts and John Andrae at the University of Georgia (UGA) pulled together a list of these practices in a 16-page guide, "Tall Fescue Toxicosis and Management." The publication, available electronically on the Internet, has become an instant success promoted by Extension specialists.

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## Oct. 7-8 workshop will focus on fescue management.

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"We were surprised at how much is known about managing toxicosis problems," Roberts says. "There are many workable alternatives for producers."

MU specialists will host a management workshop Oct. 7-8 at the MU Southwest Research Center, Mount Vernon, Mo., where much of the Missouri research on fescue has been conducted.

"Think of this as a grazing school, concentrating on tall fescue," Roberts says.

For information on the workshop, contact the MU Southwest Center at (417) 466-2148, or contact Roberts at robertscr@missouri.edu for program details.

The fescue guide can be found at [www.plantmanagementnetwork.org/pub/cm/management/2004/toxicosis](http://www.plantmanagementnetwork.org/pub/cm/management/2004/toxicosis).



**Editor's Note:** This article was written by Duane Dailey, senior writer with MU Extension & Ag Information, which supplied this article.