

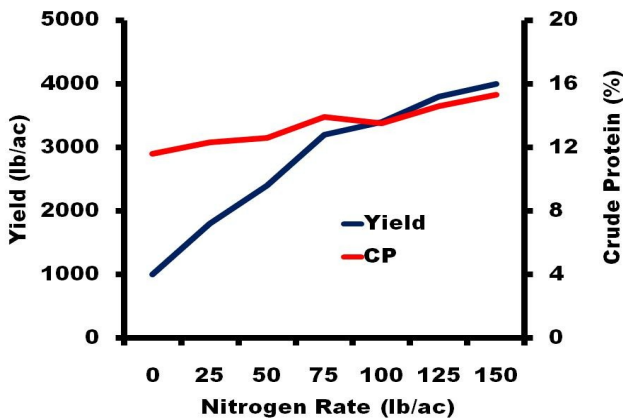
# Extending the Grazing Season: Stockpiled Tall Fescue

by Rocky Lemus

In Mississippi, one of the greatest expenses for cattle producers is winter feeding costs. One alternative to lower these costs is stockpiling forages. Tall fescue is the most desirable grass to stockpile for late fall and early winter grazing. It allows producers to extend the grazing season well beyond the growing season, reducing the demand of inputs such as hay, silage, and dehydrated forages. Under proper grazing of stockpiled tall fescue, cattle distribute their manure evenly over the pasture, returning nutrients to the soil.

## When to Begin Stockpiling Tall Fescue?

Two components to consider when stockpiling tall fescue are forage quality and yield. Important management factors affecting the balance between yield and quality of stockpiled fescue are: when to begin stockpiling (last day of grazing or mowing), nitrogen application (date and rate), and the legume composition in the pasture. Stockpiling tall fescue should start from late August to late September. Prior to stockpiling, fields should be mowed or grazed closely and livestock removed from the pasture. Tall fescue should be allowed to accumulate growth until late November or early December when hay feeding usually starts.

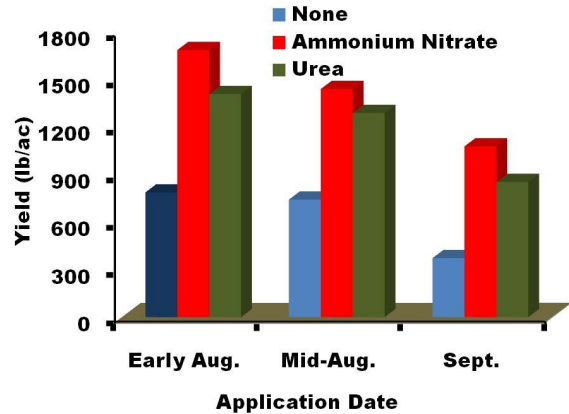


**Figure 1.** Influence of nitrogen fertilization on yield and protein of stockpiled tall fescue. Source: Johnson and Smith, 2004.

## Fertilization

Tall fescue is also very responsive to nitrogen fertilizer (Fig. 1), and high yields can be achieved with timely N application (Fig. 2). Before applying fertilizers, a soil test should be taken to determine the phosphorus, potassium, and liming requirements. Nitrogen may be top-dressed approximately 60-70 days before the end of the growing season at the rate of 40 to 60 lb N/ac along with P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> and K<sub>2</sub>O as indicated by soil test. Applying nitrogen too early may encourage the growth of late summer emerging weeds

and subsequently reduce the production of tall fescue. Applying nitrogen too late will reduce the quantity of forage, which is stockpiled. Early, mid- and late September is optimum time to apply nitrogen to tall fescue. Take into consideration that these management practices may need to be adjusted, depending on the type of livestock operation and location.



**Figure 2.** Production efficiency of KY-31 tall fescue at different nitrogen application dates. Source: Murdock, 1982.

## Management of Stockpiled Fescue

Grazing management is critical to efficient utilization of the forage. Uncontrolled grazing will waste approximately 50 to 60% of the forage due to trampling and manure deposition on unutilized forage. The best way to utilize stockpiled tall fescue is by strip-grazing. Restricting access to a 3 or 7 day forage supply will increase the number of grazing days. Install a temporary electric fence across the field dividing it so the area to be grazed first has a source of water and minerals. Once the animals have grazed this area off, move the fence back, opening up a new strip. Repeat this system until the entire field has been grazed.

Depending upon when stockpiling is initiated, fertilizer rate and fall rains, it is possible to have 50 to 60 days of available forage depending on livestock daily requirements. Due to the fact that tall fescue holds its quality, producers should graze any crop residues (corn, soybean, cotton, or milo) that might be available first in the fall and use tall fescue later in the winter. If there is a difference in length of stockpiling period among pastures, begin grazing the oldest material first before it becomes too deteriorated. If some areas have a significant amount of red clover, graze them early as well because red clover deteriorates more rapidly than tall fescue.