

Replace Toxic Fescue When Beef Prices are Good

Good beef prices give herd owners a chance to upgrade pastures to remove toxic fescue.

by **Duane Dailey**, University of Missouri Extension

Replant pastures when prices rise, or you will be stuck with bad grass when prices drop,” says Craig Roberts, University of Missouri (MU) Extension forage specialist. “Beef profits give a window that is not guaranteed to last.”

Farmers sticking with infested Kentucky-31 fescue will give up potential beef



profits in times of low prices, Roberts says. Toxic fescue gives low calf gains, low calving rates, low milk production, shaggy hair coats and fescue foot.

New novel-endophyte fescues cut losses, Roberts says.

We’ve known the problems for years. Now we have a solution, he says. The old grass contains a toxic fungus that protects the plant but harms grazing animals.

New varieties of fescue contain nontoxic endophytes. Those still protect the plant, but

grazing animals thrive on the new forage.

The Alliance for Grassland Renewal, founded in Missouri, promotes replacing toxic fescue. The group will hold renovation schools across the state.

"It's important to learn how to plant the new varieties and manage them," Roberts says. Toxic fescue survived because cows didn't like it and would not overgraze it. They love the new ones.

"Farmers lived with fescue problem for years," he says. "However, too many never saw the losses, except for the often-fatal fescue foot. When everyone in the area has toxic fescue, the slow-growing calves don't stand out."

At first, farmers balked at buying seed that costs three times that of old fescue. "Now the novel-endophyte fescue is affordable, even if higher-priced," says Roberts. "With good

prices, herd profits rise with more pounds of calf to sell.

"Producers must think ahead to when beef prices fall. That's when better profit margins from better calves create more value."

Good managers of grass and cattle know how to lower the impact of toxic fescue. They dilute fescue with clover, feed grain supplement and rotationally graze paddocks. Those practices also boost returns with novel endophytes, Roberts says.

Good managers benefit first and most, he adds. They get the quickest payback.

High beef prices make it easier for all to make the renovation.

"Now is the time," Roberts says.

Looking ahead, Roberts sees beef prices falling and feed costs rising. That is when improved returns from novel-endophyte

will help the most. In a price squeeze, good management wins.

Roberts quotes a farmer with a 250-cow beef herd: "Manage in the good times to stay in business in the bad times."

Leaders from seed companies, a testing lab, government agencies and farmers working with MU Extension created the Alliance.

The schools will be hosted at MU agricultural research stations at Mount Vernon, Cook Station, Columbia and Linneus. They start March 30. Sign-up details are at <http://grasslandrenewal.org/education.htm>.



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