

Take Action in August to Save Money on Hay this Winter

Every day spent grazing can mean money saved. Using stockpiled forages is a great way to extend the grazing season and reduce the use of stored feed in the fall and winter months. Stockpiling is allowing vegetative growth to accumulate to be used at a later time. Using stockpiled forages can maximize utilization of pastures. Other benefits may include decreased labor, equipment use, and possibly reduce overall cost. Cost of buying hay and feed is usually the main expense for livestock producers. If hay is cut on-farm, equipment and labor costs need to be taken into consideration. Stockpiled forages can often be better quality feed than hay. It is possible to use most grass species as stockpiled forages but tall fescue is typically used in Kentucky.

Tall fescue is an ideal grass to use for stockpiling. This high yielding, cool-season grass retains its quality and digestibility into late fall and early winter. Damaging frosts significantly reduce forage quality in grasses and legumes. This damage is less severe in tall fescue because of its protective waxy layer. Therefore, forage quality remains high. Protein content and digestibility decline at a slow rate in comparison to other forages. Higher amounts of crude protein and total digestible nutrients are maintained in stockpiled fescue versus fescue hay. Stockpiled fescue can be grazed to the ground with little effect on spring regrowth which allows for maximum utilization. Grazing this high quality forage is ideal for animals requiring high nutrient diets. When grazing fescue in the fall or winter the threat of fescue toxicity is reduced. Novel endophyte infected fescue or endophyte free varieties can be used to reduce these problems year-round.

Stockpiling should begin in early to mid-August. At this time, fescue should be grazed or cut down to 3 to 4 inches to allow for new growth. Cattle should be removed from the paddock to allow optimal regrowth time and maximum growth. Fertilizer should be applied in early August. It is best to use a soil test to determine the accurate amount of fertilizer needed in an area. 40 to 80 pounds of nitrogen per acre has proven to be optimal for stockpiling fescue. It is important to take current prices and individual situations into consideration when deciding if this practice will be cost-effective.

For stockpiling forages to be profitable, it is important to use the best management practices when it comes time to utilize them. It is best to start grazing stockpiled fescue in November or December. This allows for maximum growth prior to grazing and minimal quality loss. If other forages are being stockpiled, it is best to graze those fields first. Stockpiled fields should be grazed at high stocking densities to maximize forage utilization and reduce trampling and waste. Using a strip grazing method is an ideal way to graze these fields. Hay should always be kept on hand during the winter months to be prepared for adverse weather conditions such as snow or ice cover which might limit access to the stockpiled feed.

Using stockpiled forages can have many benefits and using tall fescue can increase these benefits. The use for stored feed is reduced and the stockpiled fescue can be used as a high quality feed. It can also reduce feeding labor and in many situations can save producers money. It is important to use the best management practices in order to make this practice profitable. It is essential to look at all aspects of a specific operation and to consider current prices before deciding that using this practice is best suited for a farm.