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Fescue: Dormant or Gone?

Tall fescue is a cool-season perennial grass, adapted to the soils and climate of the eastern third of Kansas. Fescue can persist under limited fertility conditions and really flourishes with management. It can be useful as forage as well as erosion management along waterways and pond dams.

Fescue will grow when the average temperatures are as low as 34°F, but it thrives when temps are above 45°F. Summer growth is hindered by hot, dry conditions, with little growth occurring above 85°F. Grazing should be avoided during late June, July, and August, to prevent grass damage and low animal performance. Pastures should be “rested” during summer months to allow the plants to increase vigor. Animals readily graze fescue during April, May, and June and again in the fall.

For the 2022 fall grazing season, I have received lots of calls about the persistence of stands through the severe drought conditions. Fescue generally breaks dormancy when temperatures are consistently below 85°F and moisture is received. For some areas of the Wildcat Extension District, enough moisture has been welcomed, and the temperatures have been favorable.

To find out if fescue is dormant or did not survive the drought, check your typical stands. If the plants are crispy and the root comes out of the soil with little tugging, chances are that the plants did not survive. There is likely still a seed bed present that may emerge late or next season. If you're in this situation, consider using a cool season annual forage crop, like oats, to get through the next few months. Re-establishing a fescue stand will need to wait until the fall of 2023 in our area.

In fescue stands that are greening up, keep the grazing pressure off until the leaves are a minimum of four inches tall, six inches is better. These leaves are the solar panels that will build the root system and grow thrifty plants. The plants will become more winter hardy with sturdy root systems.

I have seen fescue coming through in pastures that received very light spring grazing pressure and no summer harvest of hay or grazing. But in pastures that were sacrificed due to lack of available feedstuffs, the picture is a lot gloomier.

Tall fescue is the best adapted cool-season perennial grass in southeast Kansas for winter use. Thus, it can provide most of the spring, fall and winter feed for a cow herd. Fescue should be used in conjunction with warm-season forage crops like native grasses, Bermuda grass, or warm-season annuals to provide summer forage. While it is not a “silver bullet” to any grazing system, it can decrease the days of feeding hay.

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