

Managing Around the Fescue Fungus

Clyde D. Lane Jr.
Professor and Extension Beef Cattle Specialist
Department of Animal Science, University of Tennessee

Most pastures in Tennessee have some fescue present. Research has shown that there is a strong possibility that the fescue will contain the fescue endophyte.

The endophyte is a fungus that lives inside the plant and is not visible to the eye. The endophyte helps protect the plant and allows it to grow more proficiently. The bad side is that the endophyte reduces performance of cattle that are grazing the fescue.

The ideal solution to the problem is to replace all of the endophyte infected fescue. This is not practical. Some land in Tennessee does not lend itself to reestablishment. In addition the cost of replacement is too great for this to be a practical solution. There is always the question of what grass species can be used to replace the fescue. Fungus infected fescue is the most persistent grass available for Tennessee producers.

With replacement of infected fescue not being a good option, then ways must be utilized to manage around the problems. The best option to help alleviate the problems with the endophyte infected fescue is to add clovers. The clovers help dilute the fescue and also improve the quality.

Another option is to keep the fescue grazed close enough to keep the plant in a young vegetative state. The fungus is present in greater concentration in the leaf sheath and the stems. Keeping the grass short enough to keep these from forming will reduce the amount of the endophyte consumed by animals.

Grazing other grass species when the temperature is above 80F also seems to help. Research has shown that the detrimental effects of the endophyte are greater when the temperature is above 80F. Summer annuals and bermudagrass are two options for grazing during the summer.

Consider starting the breeding season early so the breeding does not occur during the hot part of the spring and early summer. Kentucky research has shown that the conception rate goes down as the temperature increases.

For additional information on managing around the fescue endophyte, contact your local Extension agent.