

SPRING PASTURE FOLLOWING THE DROUGHT

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The last half of 2016 was not pleasant for many cattle producers across the state. Drought during late summer caused overgrazing, and the lack of fall rain prevented fall growth of tall fescue. The result was a hay feeding season that start a couple of months early, and severely overgrazed pastures. There are a couple of very specific questions that producers are currently dealing with.

- 1. Can I spring seed tall fescue to thicken a stand?** Most tall fescue pastures took a beating last summer and fall. Drought, high temperatures, and overgrazing are the trifecta of tall fescue pasture death. Many pastures are going to have thin stand, which leads to increased weed pressure, reduced forage yield, and potentially more overgrazing this spring. There is the temptation to drill tall fescue seed in the spring to thicken the stand. There are some potential problems with spring seeding. If the weather doesn't cooperate perfectly, then the seed will germinate and begin to grow. But after just a couple months, when they are still small with weak root systems, weeds such as crabgrass begin to germinate and grow, quickly outcompeting the tall fescue seedlings. The eventual result is a less than successful stand establishment. If you want to increase your chances for success, you have to plant early (mid Feb) and shallow to get the plants up as quickly as possible. Even this doesn't guarantee success.
- 2. Is there a better way to thicken a stand of tall fescue?** The most consistently dependable method to thicken a stand of tall fescue is to wait until the fall, when growing conditions are more suitable for a longer period of time. In September, when fall rains begin and temperatures cool, graze or clip a pasture to remove all excess growth. Then drill 20 lbs of tall fescue per acre. No reason to fail by cutting the seeding rate in half. This gives the plants all fall and winter to get established before stressful weed pressure begins to develop. These plants will have a root system that can survive the heat/drought from the next summer.
- 3. How do I improve forage production this spring and summer?** If you don't have enough tall fescue plants to provide all the growth you need this spring, then you will need to seed a cool-season annual like spring oats or turnips. These plants give a lot of growth in a relatively short period of time. Then as it gets to late May, you will need to seed a summer annual like sorghum x sudangrass or crabgrass to provide forage during the summer. This will then prepare the field for reseeding tall fescue in the fall.

The problems created by drought sometimes cannot be solved with one simple practice. There may need to be a 2-3 step process to get fields back into shape. Thickening a thin stand of tall fescue is a good example of that.