

Improving a Weak Stand of Tall Fescue

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After the drought, many of the tall fescue pastures and hayfields across the state have thin stands. This creates a difficult situation. There may not be anything more difficult to deal with than a weak stand of grass. With a thin stand, no amount of fertilizer will make up for the lack of plants. Yield will be low, and the open spots in the field will result in increased weed pressure. Without a good stand of plants, management becomes much more challenging.

The problem that most people face is that the stand does not have enough plants to give the full yield, but it has enough plants that you hesitate to kill everything out and start over. What you would like to do is add more plants to the stand without losing a production season. This is often hard to accomplish. There are enough open spots to let weeds get established, but not enough open spots to let tall fescue plants get established.

Here are two methods of trying to “bulk up” a stand of tall fescue. These methods should only be tried in the fall.

Method 1 - The “Chance for Success” Method - In this method, have the pasture or hayfield clipped of by late August. As soon as the fall rains start and the tall fescue plants that are present begin to grow, apply .75 to 1 pint per acre of paraquate or one quart of glyphosate. The next day, use a no-till drill and seed 15 lb of tall fescue. The low rates of herbicides will probably not kill much of the tall fescue, but it should stunt the plants that are present long enough to give the new fescue seedlings a fighting chance. Be sure to follow all instructions found on the label.

Method 2 - The “Drill and Hope” Method - This method is similar to the one above, except for a couple of points. First, instead of using a herbicide to decrease the competition from the existing plants, use grazing. Have the field grazed extremely close, hoping to give the new seedlings a chance to get established. The second difference is the timing. Instead of doing it as soon as the fall rains begin, keep the pasture grazed and delay seeding until the last week or so of September. The goal is to use grazing and timing to minimize how fast the established plants can regrow, and how much competition they can cause. Everything else is the same. Use 15 lb of seed per acre, and use a no-till drill.

Both of these methods have a degree of risk involved. Weather conditions will greatly influence their success. As you can hopefully tell from the names, method 2 is much more risky than method 1. To improve your chances of success, make sure the fertility is in good shape. Also, use the full seeding rate for tall fescue, and don't plant too deep. The seed need to be placed ¼ to ½ inches deep. Try to avoid using any broadleaf herbicides until the spring.