

Forage Factsheet – Tall Fescue

Species Name: Tall Fescue – *Festuca arundinacea*

Origin: England.

Longevity: 5-10 years.

Uses: Pasture, hay, erosion control.

Optimal time of use: Tall fescue can be cut for hay but is best suited to grazing, due to its basal growth form. Haying should be carried out when the seed heads begin to form but before flowering. Graze tall fescue pastures early in the growing season when the plant leaves are young and succulent. Tall fescue becomes coarse and less palatable as it matures.

Recovery after use: Tall fescue has very slow regrowth and produces few leaves per tiller. After early summer grazing it takes until fall for any significant regrowth to occur.

Yield: Tall fescue yields approximately 65-70% of meadow bromegrass. Tall fescue yields approximately 4700 lbs/acre (5430 kg/ha) in the Black and Grey soil zones.

Palatability/Nutritional Value: Tall fescue palatability is good if grazed early. Palatability can be affected by high alkaloid and endophyte concentrations within the plant. High alkaloid levels can cause lower feed intake, diarrhea, watery eyes, fast breathing and lack of thrift. Canadian varieties have been developed to have low alkaloid levels. Livestock consuming tall fescue with high endophyte levels can exhibit lower performance, forage intake, weight gains, milk production and reproduction. In severe cases, cattle can contract "fescue foot" where constricted circulation to the extremities can cause sloughing of feet and tails. Management practices to reduce the risk of endophyte toxicity include the following: prevent the vegetation from maturing, dilute tall fescue hay with other feeds and avoid applying excess nitrogen fertilizer. There are endophyte-free varieties available. Purchasing certified seed of a low alkaloid and endophyte-free variety ensure palatability. Tall fescue has an average total digestible nutrient (TDN) level of 59% and crude protein of 9-12% mid-summer.

Competitiveness: Tall fescue is competitive with weeds and other grasses.

Winter Hardiness: Tall fescue has moderate winter hardiness. Stand longevity is reduced by poor snow cover.

Drought Tolerance: Established tall fescue is moderately drought tolerant. Tall fescue has reduced persistence in the Brown and Dark Brown soil zones.

Erosion Control: Tall fescue is deep rooted and contributes a large quantity of organic matter to the soil. Tall fescue may be used in eroded areas and waterways.

Ease of Establishment: Tall fescue seedlings are slow growing and require at least one full year to establish before the stand can be used.

Suggested Mixtures Including legumes with tall fescue will improve feed palatability and quality. Tall fescue can displace other grasses in a mix.

Salinity Tolerance: Tall fescue has very good salinity tolerance.

Flooding Tolerance: Tall fescue withstands approximately two to five weeks of spring flooding. It thrives on wet and/or poorly drained sites.

Soil Texture: Tall fescue is adapted to moist loamy to clay soils. It will grow on dry soils but persistence is reduced.

Acidity Tolerance: Tall fescue tolerates soil pH as low as 5.0.

Management Considerations Rotationally graze to allow adequate rest. Maintain snow cover to reduce winter injury.