

Turning Adversity Into Opportunity

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The long drought of 1993 was hard on the over one million acres of tall fescue in Georgia! By September, much of northeastern and central Georgia was brown and it looked like closely grazed tall fescue pastures were mostly dead. However, with rains in late October it was possible to see in November that there was a lot of living tall fescue in many pastures. A few pastures on especially droughty sites have very few living plants remaining. Others have lost 30 to 40% of the stand. All pastures have lost some stand, 5 to 10%, but will recover naturally with time.

The question is, what to do about these losses? First, it is important to evaluate each pasture and determine the existing stand. Where losses are severe, then there is no alternative but to replant the tall fescue. If it is not replanted, weeds will fill in the empty places for next year's grazing.

The adversity facing us with tall fescue stand losses is not all bleak - it offers opportunities to plant clovers in pasture and improve quality and production for the coming season. Where stands are thinned somewhat, the tall fescue will eventually spread and fill in. In the meantime, the dead areas will reduce competition for overseeded clovers. Red or ladino clovers drilled into the sod can really make a big difference in cattle performance this year.

Sodseeding of clovers can be done during late January and February. (1) Soil test and apply the recommended phosphorus and potassium. (2) Plant inoculated clover seed. Red clover is especially recommended because of its superior rapid establishment, drought tolerance (it generally came through last summer's drought), good summer growth, high yield, and survival over 2 years. Excellent new varieties on the market are Cherokee, Concord, and Renegade. Plant 10 lbs/acre of red clover. If you wish to plant ladino clover, varieties available include Osceola and Regal. Plant 2 to 3 lb/acre of ladino clover. (3) Plant seed at the proper depth (1/4 inch for ladino and 1/2 inch for red clover) with a sodseeding machine. A grain drill does not penetrate the sod well but can be used if the soil is wet.

Broadcast seeding of red and white

clovers can be done during January and February if cattle are concentrated on a pasture to trample in the clover seed. Once the area is trampled in, the cattle should be moved to another pasture to allow clover establishment. It is much less effective than drilling in the seed, but may give a fair clover stand. The cost is low so any clover stand will easily pay for the low input of time and money.

Fescue stands thinned by drought offer an opportunity to establish clover in the pasture. However, where much of the fescue is dead, replanting must be done. Probably the best approach is to graze what is there this winter, then drill in pearl millet or sorghum-sudangrass next spring and graze or use it for hay. Next fall, drill in 20 to 25 lb/acre of tall fescue seed after fertilizing according to soil test. This method allows cattle to be kept off the newly planted pasture until the following spring, giving the new fescue a chance to get well established.

Another possibility on tall fescue pas-

tures with large stand losses is to drill in the tall fescue seed during late January or February after applying needed fertilizer. Unfortunately, there is the temptation to keep cattle on the pasture to utilize grass on the existing older plants. This means that cattle will start grazing young fescue seedlings and keep them nibbled off, preventing good establishment. Grazing these new seedlings during late winter and spring will result in poor root development and greater susceptibility to summer drought. One approach to this problem is to turn cattle to graze for only a short period of time, utilizing available forage and then removing them to allow recovery. If these seedlings are not allowed to develop into large plants, summer survival may not be satisfactory and certainly the fall growth will be reduced.

We've had a tough year and the tall fescue losses are a serious adversity. But, if your stand losses are light, it does offer the opportunity for clover establishment and good spring and summer pastures.

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