

## FESCUE 911

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Dennis Hancock, Forage Extension Specialist  
The University of Georgia

Tall fescue pastures in the Southeast have taken a real beating over the past 3 – 4 years. Extreme drought and the severe overgrazing of these pastures have caused substantial stand declines. Of course, any gap in the pasture will be filled by something. Usually, that something is not a very desirable pasture species, though. Once the weeds get a foothold, it is a never-ending battle to keep them at bay. Eventually, a decision must be made: “Should I keep it or should I replace it?” Unfortunately, this has been a common refrain of late. In this month’s article, I’ll explain some of what has contributed to persistence problems with tall fescue. Then, some recommendations will be presented for a range of thin fescue stands.

### ***What Has Changed?***

We certainly have had some major weather-related challenges in the last few years. But, is that the real cause for these problems? I submit that the decline in tall fescue stands in our pastures cannot be totally blamed on the changes in our rainfall and weather patterns. Take a look at the tall fescue growing in the fencerows and along the side of the road. Those stands have not declined as much. So what is different?

The biggest difference is grazing intensity. Grazing intensity today is much greater than it used to be. There are many reasons for this, and I detail many of them in another article in this month’s issue entitled “Resetting Your Stocking Rate.” Suffice it to say here that we graze tall fescue harder today than we ever have before and we have been particularly hard on it during the recent droughts.

If a tall fescue pasture is grazed too tightly during a drought, it is likely that severe damage will be done to the plant’s growing point. This is why we recommend preventing animals from grazing tall fescue shorter than 2 inches. Rotationally grazed pastures can help prevent this damage. If you aren’t set up to rotationally graze your cattle, identify and use a “sacrifice area” to limit the damage.

Incidentally, we have also seen declines in some stands of tall fescue that have been used exclusively as hayfields. The reason for declines in these fields is similar to the pasture situation... hay cutting height has decreased. The disc mower has many advantages over older, sickle-bar mowers. However, there is a tendency for the operator to cut tall fescue too short with the disc mower. Scalping a tall fescue hayfield by leaving less than 2 inches of stubble will dramatically shorten the life span of the stand. It is best to use a 2.5 – 3 inch setting for tall fescue hayfields to ensure no areas are scalped.

One other reason that we have lost tall fescue stands is the increasing reliance upon poultry litter (and, to a lesser degree, other organic-based fertilizer sources). Poultry litter makes an excellent fertilizer source for pastures and hayfields, but the problem with its use in tall fescue stands is that it is commonly put on too late in the spring (after March). Though tall fescue pastures do respond well to spring-applied poultry litter, much of the N that is released from the poultry litter does not become available until later into the summer. As a consequence, the competitive advantage is shifted toward the warm season components in the pasture. Many tall fescue pastures have been nearly completely taken over by common bermudagrass and other warm season grasses because of this phenomenon.

### ***Recommendations for Managing Fescue Stands Under Stress***

There are any number of scenarios that one might encounter when attempting to manage fescue stands under stress. In the interest of brevity, however, let’s consider three scenarios.

1) The stand is relatively new and/or is holding up well. The key in this situation is to maintain good fertility and prevent overgrazing. A well-managed rotational grazing system will greatly improve stand life, too. Applications of 30 – 60 lbs of N/acre in early September through mid-October will allow tall fescue to tiller in and maintain a thick stand. Fall applications of poultry litter can be used effectively, but remember that only 50-60% of the total N in the litter is readily available.

2) The stand has declined, but there is still a descent stand. Typically, tall fescue is best used when it is the most prominent species in the pasture. As tall fescue thins, it is common for a producer to add white clover or some other legume to fill in any voids left in the pasture. This is a recommended practice, but it may not always be practical. Heavy weed pressure or poor soil fertility may limit the utilization of legumes in such pastures. More frequently, common bermudagrass begins to emerge in the voids left by thinning stands of tall fescue. In this instance, it may be best to maintain the stand as a mixed grass sward. In either case, the ideal situation is to ensure that the tall fescue stand still maintains dominance in the pasture. Though tall fescue will be less prominent in the summer and more prominent in the spring and fall, its productivity for the season should provide at least 60% of the total forage production in that pasture.

Maintaining the balance in mixed stands of tall fescue with other species generally requires more management. The balance between tall fescue and the other components in the pasture can be maintained if N fertilizer is applied in the fall of the year. Again, applications of 30 – 60 lbs of N/acre in early September through mid-October allow tall fescue to tiller in and thicken up. This is essentially the only tool that is available to enhance tall fescue's competitiveness.

3) The stand is fighting an uphill battle. Once the tall fescue comprises less than 60% of the total forage production in a pasture, the mixture that is present will generally not be reaching its full yield potential. At this point, it is important to consider options for re-establishing the pasture to tall fescue or some other forage species. If weed competition is substantial, a smother crop of pearl millet or sorghum x sudangrass may be necessary to suppress the weeds leading up to fall re-establishment of the tall fescue. A detailed description of techniques for re-establishing tall fescue can be found in the Extension bulletins entitled "Georgia Forages: Grass Species" or "Novel Endophyte-Infected Tall Fescue."

More information on managing tall fescue pastures can be found on the Georgia Forages website ([www.georgiaforages.com](http://www.georgiaforages.com)). On this website, you can also access numerous Extension bulletins and factsheets about tall fescue management, improved cultivars, and establishment procedures. Of course, your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Agent can also provide you with additional information and advice on how to efficiently use tall fescue in your forage program. If you have questions about how to adapt these recommendations to your operation, contact your local Extension office by dialing 1-800-ASK-UGA1.