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Is it Worth it?—You Betcha!

by Julie A. Best
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Bill Lowery of Russell County is a man on the move. By day, he is a rural mail carrier. But his real love is the family farm.

“This is my sanctuary. It means a lot to me. My great grandfather had a farm here. I’ve been involved with the farm all my life.”

However, his father did not encourage him to go into farming full-time. So, like many other farmers in Alabama, he has an off-the-farm career to support the family and enjoys dabbling with the farm to supplement the income.

With an outside job, Lowery does not have time to farm all the land. He leases the acreage that is used for row cropping. Lowery does, however, run several head of cattle that he takes care of himself.

John Curtis, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationist in Russell County indicates that about three years ago, Mr. Lowery planted a section of pasture to the new non-toxic endophyte fescue. This non-toxic endophyte inserted into tall fescue furnishes the excellent animal performance of endophyte-free tall fescue varieties but has the toughness and stand persistence of toxic endophyte-infected varieties.



John Curtis (left), NRCS District Conservationist, and Bill Lowery are pleased with the stand of novel endophyte fescue pasture. Novel endophyte furnishes the excellent animal performance of endophyte-free tall fescue varieties but has the toughness and stand persistence of toxic endophyte-infected varieties.



Above, Lowery was looking for a grazing system that provided adequate forage and would alleviate some of the “hands on” aspects of a cattle operation.

“Originally, what I wanted to do was improve forage for enhanced performance in my cattle,” says Lowery. The way he has accomplished that in the past was to plant a lot of winter grazing, cool season grazing such as rye and ryegrass. While that worked well for him, it was an expensive proposition to plant the seed each year as well as a time consuming process to repeat that same procedure year after year.

Lowery says, “I have always produced a lot of hay; that’s the mainstay of any cattle operation. You’ve got to have a certain amount anyway regardless of your forage program because there are short falls in the grazing times.” Lowery was looking for ways to fill those gaps. He had read about growing fescue in the lower part of

Alabama and Georgia, but it seemed there were problems with the survivability. The endophyte-free tall fescue stands seemed to deteriorate quickly. It looked to him as if the endophyte-free fescue required too much management for the time that he had available.

Then he began to read about the new novel endophyte varieties. The novel endophyte is non-toxic to cattle yet includes the fungus in fescue that keeps the stand healthy and causes the grass to persist in drought conditions. As an experiment, Lowery took a 45-acre pasture that had some drought damage, sprayed it with herbicide to kill the existing grass, burned the area in late fall, and then planted the novel endophyte seed with a no-till planter. He got a real good stand of grass. “I’ve gone through three winters now, and it has provided good forage. The cattle like to graze it,” says Lowery. “It is expensive to plant, but it seems to be worth the expense.”

Lowery indicated that, like any fescue, you have to manage the forage in order to get peak performance. Management requires stockpiling it in the fall, which means letting the grass grow so the cattle will have forage into the winter when normally there is no growth at all. Like any cool season forage, it starts growing in the spring. It starts in March and continues on into the late spring. The hot conditions of summer cause the growth to slow down. During summer months, the grass can be grazed lightly for short periods or allowed to rest.

Last year, Lowery planted another pasture to the non-toxic fescue. “I had been renting some of my land to a local farmer who grew peanuts, and I had been planting bahia grass behind peanuts. I decided to plant more of the non-toxic fescue. It has been unbelievable how it has grown,” says Lowery. “I know that following peanuts had a lot to do with it. The soil had been worked and the nutrients from the peanuts were there. I did not graze it during the winter in order to get it established, but I have grazed it this spring and summer. I

haven't pulled off of it yet, and they can't keep up with it. I have 43 head on 45 acres."

Lowery says, "I am pretty much 'it' on my farm. I don't have much help. I work full-time. I wanted a labor-saver. In winter months when the days are short and my regular job takes up most of the day, I don't want to have to come out here and feed cattle with tractor lights. It's not a complicated system, and I think it is something that more people ought to look into."

It's a system that seems to be working for Lowery. Last year he did not feed hay until the middle of February. "You are making it work," says Curtis. "You can't out guess the weather and you always will have decisions to make. You just have to adapt to the situation."

Lowery says, "I get frustrated because I see things that need to be done, and working full-time, I can't do them. As I deliver the mail, I see folks making hay. I come out here at 4:00 to start bailing, and the rain comes." While other farmers may be saying—I got the hay up just in time—folks in Lowery's position are frustrated. "If you can grow it out there in the field and let the cattle cut it, you are ahead of the game," says Curtis. Plus, you have a better forage.

With assistance from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Lowery plans to plant another 31 acres of non-toxic fescue. EQIP is a voluntary conservation program administered by USDA-NRCS that offers financial and technical assistance with installation of conservation practices on eligible agricultural land. "With the new grazing system, I'm building up my herd," says Lowery. "I believe in renewable resources. I am a grass farmer—the cattle are the vehicle to harvest it and to sell it."

Lowery adds, "My wife says, 'Is it worth it?', and I say, 'Yes, it's worth it—sometimes, most of the time.' As I said, this is my sanctuary. It means a lot to me."

For information about conservation programs that may be beneficial to you, contact your local USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service office.

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