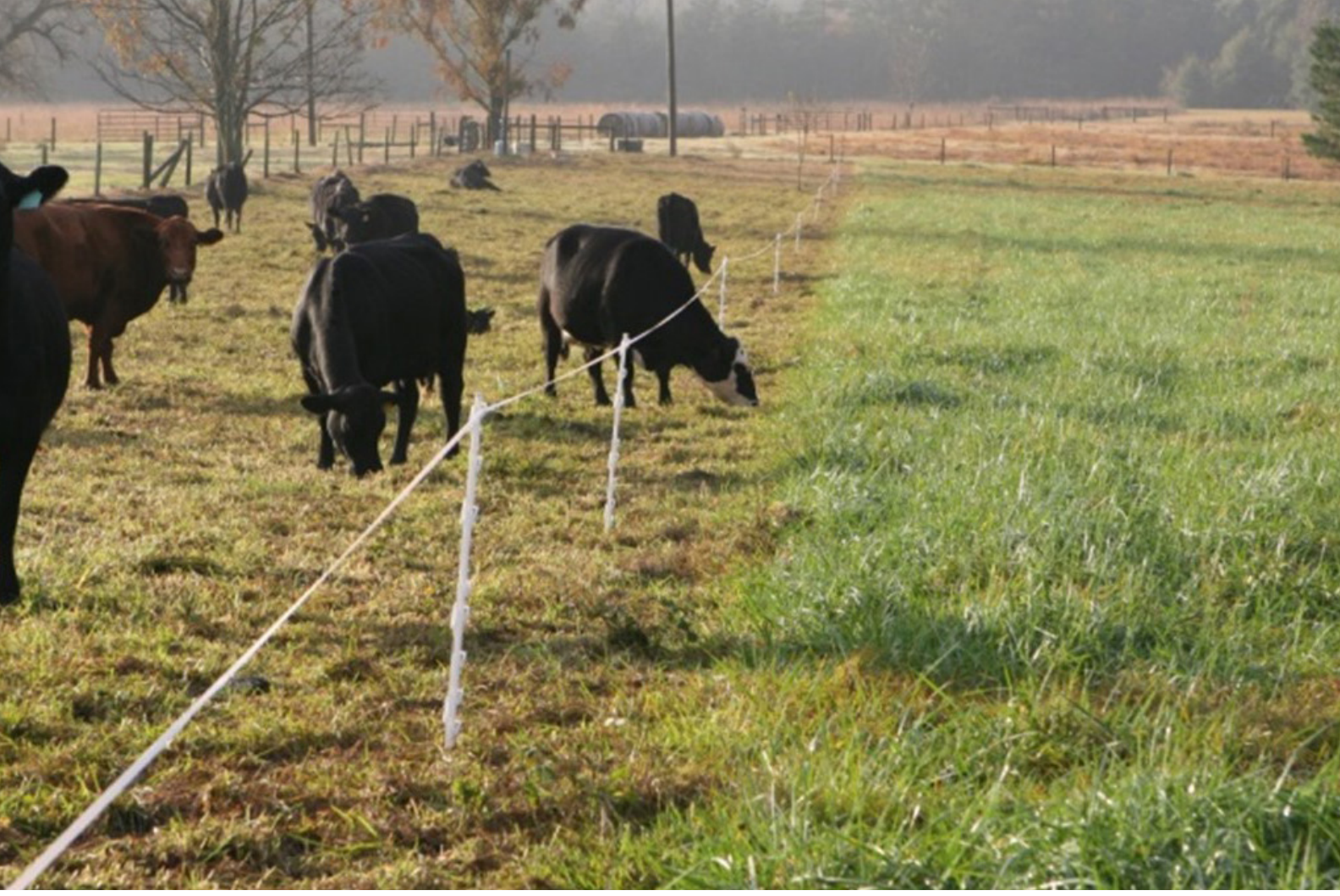

Strip grazing stockpiled tall fescue (photo courtesy of Dr. Matt Poore)

Stockpiling Perennial Grasses for Winter Grazing

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It is hard to think about the cold winter months during the dog days of August, but now is the time to prepare for winter feeding. Winter feeding is the most expensive component of beef cattle management representing 40-75% of the cost of production for cows. While hay and feed supplement are often seen as the only way to provide feed during the transition to spring grazing, stockpiling can offer an additional, cost-effective option for winter feed management.

Getting Started with Stockpiling

Stockpiling forage allows forage to accumulate for grazing at a later time, often called deferred grazing and it can be done throughout the state. Stockpiling perennial forages maximizes forage use and extends the grazing season to reduce hay feeding and supplementation during the fall forage gap. In South Alabama, bahiagrass and bermudagrass can both be fall stockpiled and in North Alabama, tall fescue is the best option for fall stockpiling.

Deciding how much to stockpile is dependent on how many animal grazing days (animals grazing × length of grazing season) and how productive the field is (forage yield). Here is an example using 10, 1,500 lb cows with a dry matter intake of 2% of BW for a 30-day stockpiling window.

Forage needed: 10 cows × 1,500 lb × 2% dry matter intake = 300 lb dry matter per day
OR 9,000 lb dry matter per grazing period (30 days)

Acreage Needed: Tall fescue forage yield = 3,100 lb dry matter/acre but only 75% forage utilization
= 2,325 lb dry matter/acre available

9,000 lb dry matter ÷ 2,325 lb dry matter/acre = **3.9 acres stockpiled**

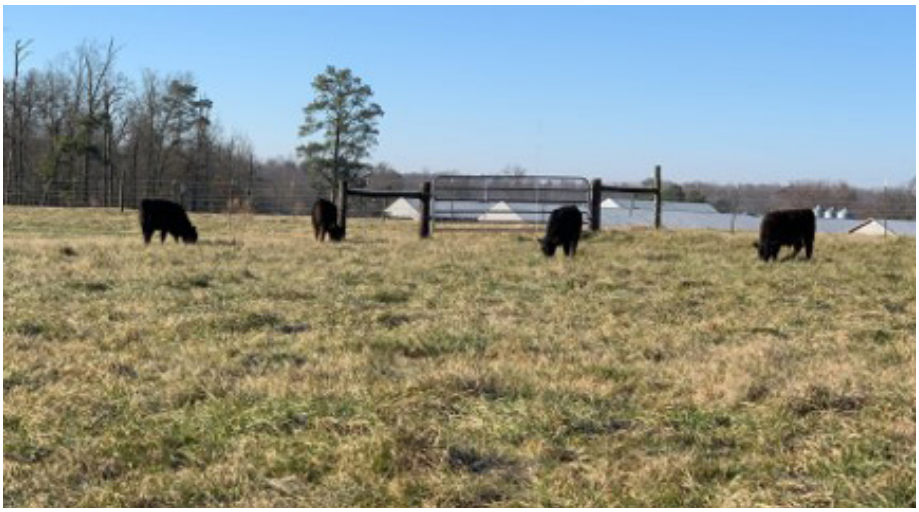
Other factors that determine the acreage are the grazing management practices used. 75% forage utilization was used in this example, representing strip grazing with only 1-2 days of forage allocated at a time. If less intense grazing management is used, forage utilization will decline to as low as 30% under continuous or free-access grazing management.

Regardless of the grass species and region, the steps to fall stockpiling are very similar. Once the field is selected, mow or graze down the field to be stockpiled in mid-August. This helps remove any over mature forage and reduce summer weeds. Afterwards, fertilize with nitrogen. For tall fescue, add 60-80 lb nitrogen per acre, for bahiagrass 50 lb nitrogen per acre, and for bermudagrass 60-80 lb nitrogen per acre. Then walk away from the field. And just like the infomercial says, 'Set it and forget it'. The goal is to keep cattle off the field until the first killing frost. Once a killing frost occurs, the grass will go dormant (bahiagrass and bermudagrass) or slow growth considerably (tall fescue). This should be approximately the same time of year that you would normally start feeding hay on your farm.

Nutritional Value of Stockpiled Forage
The nutritional value of stockpiled forage is largely dependent on the forage to be stockpiled. Stockpiled tall fescue sampled in late February in Jackson County had 15% crude protein (CP) and 64% total digestible nutrients (TDN). More than adequate for dry or lactating cows. A survey of 10 producer farms in South Tennessee and North Alabama showed that CP of tall fescue declined from 18% CP in October to 15% in January and February. However, this was still well above the nutritional needs of dry (8% CP) or lactating (12% CP) cows.

Stockpiled warm-season grasses typically have a lower forage nutritional value than tall fescue. A 4-year project in Arkansas reported an average of 68% TDN in October declined to 58% TDN in February. The quality of the bermudagrass had a greater decline throughout the winter than has been observed in tall fescue. However, this TDN is sufficient for lactating cows through December and for dry cows through the entire winter stockpiling season. A recent project to determine the value of stockpiled bahiagrass in Alabama has shown that TDN was 61% in October and 59% in November with CP of 14% in October and 12% in November. As a result of nutritional value and limited forage yield production, bahiagrass is considered a short-term stockpiling option (late fall usage) and may require more feed supplementation to maintain cattle productivity.

Stockpiling is a great option for producers to fill in the fall forage gap. With proper management, stockpiled forage can provide high quality forage for 30-45 days or more in late fall and early winter. Proper nitrogen fertility in August and improved grazing management are keys to success with stockpiled forages. Both bermudagrass and tall fescue can be effectively used to replace hay requirements in most beef operations. However, supplementation may be required for some classes of livestock to meet production goals. For more information on stockpiling or any forage-related questions visit www.alabamaforages.com or contact Dr. Leanne Dillard at alabamaforages@aces.edu.



Stockpiled tall fescue in Jackson County in February 2021

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