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Making the Most of Fescue in the Valley

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Tall fescue is a widespread pasture grass of great importance in the Shenandoah Valley. It is productive and persistent on the marginal ground that makes up much of our pastureland and, as a result, it is the nutritional base for many of our livestock. The main downfall of fescue is its potential to cause a disorder known as fescue toxicosis. The majority of fescue in our region is infected with a fungus (referred to as "endophyte-infected") that produces alkaloids toxic to grazing animals; the resulting toxicosis causes reduced feed intake, reduced reproductive performance, and other symptoms.

One of the first steps in managing fescue toxicosis is to realize the extent of the problem. The Augusta County Extension office tested 25 farms in Rockingham, August and Rockbridge counties, in order to demonstrate the occurrence of endophyte-infected fescue in the Shenandoah Valley.

Results of testing

The results were simple, and conclusively demonstrated to most of the study participants that endophyte-infected fescue, and the potential for fescue toxicosis, is widespread.

Test locations: June 2013

- 65% of fescue pastures sampled were 100% endophyte-infected
- 30% of fescue pastures sampled were 80-90% endophyte-infected
- Lowest infection rate (1 pasture) was 50% infected. This farm had stored its fescue seed for 5 years prior to planting, in an attempt to kill the seed-borne endophyte.