

Tall fescue pasture affects conception in ewes

ATLANTA, Ga — Sheep grazing on tall fescue pastures take longer to conceive than those grazing on orchardgrass pastures, says Paul Lynch, an animal scientist with USDA's Science and Education Administration.

In tests at the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center in Maryland, ewes eating tall fescue took two to three times longer to conceive than those eating orchardgrass.

Delayed conception extends the lambing season and is costly to sheep breeders, adds Lynch. A long lambing season increases the need for farm labor.

In addition, lambs may be born during the summer when heat and parasitic infections decrease the

feed efficiency of lambs. Also, delayed lambing interferes with producers' chances of having three lamb crops in two years.

In the Beltsville experiments Lynn, James Bond and their coworkers divided 36 crossbred ewes into six groups and placed them in acre pastures from June to November.

All pasture contained pure stands of forages. Two contained an experimental variety of tall fescue, two contained KY-31, a commonly grown tall fescue, and two contained orchardgrass. Ewes were bred by rams placed in the pasture and the rams were periodically rotated from one group of ewes to another.

In November, the ewes were

moved into drylots and fed a half pound of grain per day each, plus all the hay they would eat. Hay was made from the pastures in which the ewes had been grazing. The type of pasture and hay did not affect the weight gains of the ewes.

Delayed conception time was the only difference among sheep from fescue pastures. Ewes did not exhibit changes in eating behavior, nor did they show symptoms of fescue toxicity, Lynch notes. (Cattle grazing on adjacent plots exhibited signs of summer syndrome.)

There were also no significant differences in gestation length, average number of lambs, weight of lambs at birth, or lamb survival to 60 days of age.

Lynch reported the scientists' findings in Atlanta before the

annual meeting of the Southern Section, American Society of Animal Science.

"These studies show that fescue contains a factor that delays conception in sheep. We plan to follow up with further experiments to determine why this delay occurs," said Lynch.

Tall fescue is sometimes called the "wonder grass." Ordinarily, it is a valuable forage. It is the predominant cool-season grass in the southeastern United States from Georgia to Maryland, west to

Nebraska and north to Minnesota. It is hardy, will tolerate drought as well as wet weather, does well in poor soils, and tolerates alkaline as well as saline soils.

Tall fescue grows particularly well during cool weather, staying green longer into winter than most other grasses. Once established, this bunchgrass is durable, producing a dense turf that holds up well under grazing. Currently, there are over 35 million acres of tall fescue grown in this country.



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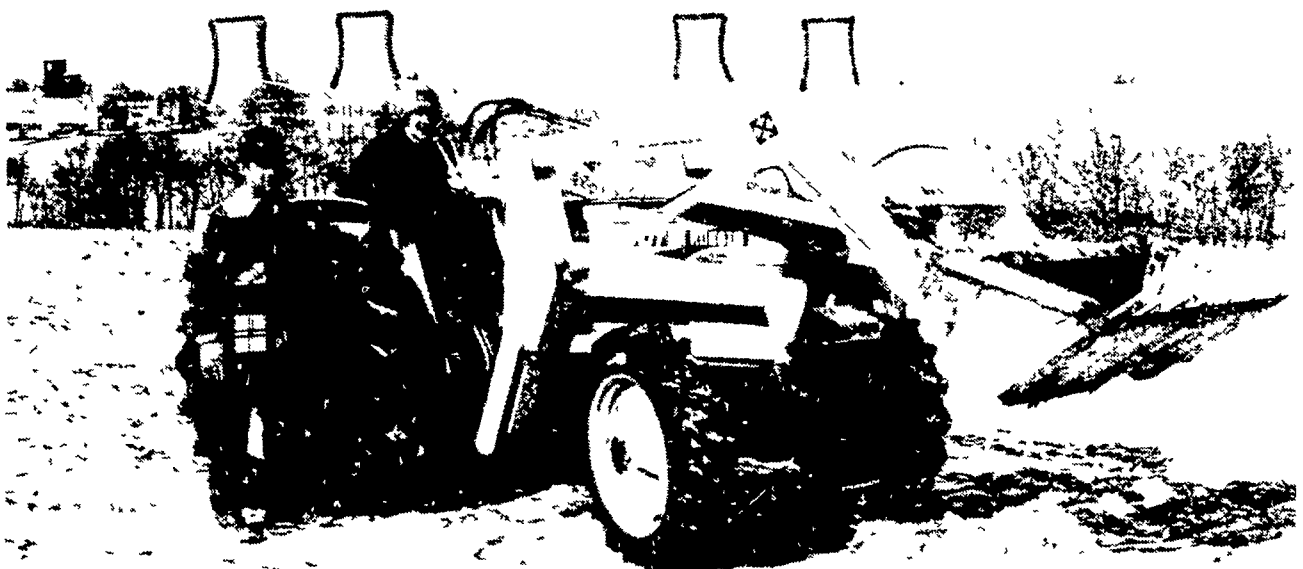
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