

A Word of Caution Against Camelids on Turf

by Dr. Dave Barker

Fungal endophytes were discovered in tall fescue and perennial ryegrass during mid 1980's. Since that time, we have learned of their potential to produce alkaloids harmful to livestock. The symptoms are usually not life-threatening, but can include abortion. We have also learned of potential benefits these alkaloids have in increasing plant insect resistance, summer hardiness, and overall yield. These differences have polarized the turf and forage seed industries.

The turf industry has a mixed position on endophyte, with some companies favoring high endophyte levels and some not making any specific claims regarding endophyte levels. Irrespective of these positions, most turf seed is sold with endophyte-infection levels up to 100%. There are few disadvantages of endophyte in turf, and many advantages with high endophyte levels.

The forage seed industry has adopted a standard of endophyte-free seed. This minimizes the possibility that livestock can become exposed to toxic endophyte alkaloids. Endophyte-free and endophyte-infected ryegrass and tall fescue appear identical and can only be distinguished by a laboratory test. There is some possibility that endophyte-free pastures can become re-invaded by endophyte-infected plants, and many growers prefer to exclude tall fescue and perennial ryegrass from their seed mixtures (all clovers, orchardgrass and Kentucky bluegrass are endophyte-free). Fescue and ryegrass are great forage species, however, and there is merit to retain them as pasture species. When establishing pastures using these species (or purchasing hay containing these species) ensure you use only forage seed that comes from a reputable seed dealer and that it comes with an endophyte test. It is also a good idea to learn to identify these species in pasture, and have an endophyte test every 2-3 years.

There are 4 rules for grazing camelids on tall fescue and ryegrass turf:

- 1) Don't mix forage and turf seed for pasture intended for livestock
- 2) Don't graze livestock on the turf around your house or farm buildings
- 3) Don't feed hay from turf (beside farm buildings, roadsides, or recreational fields)
- 4) Don't carry turf to livestock (e.g. in pens at shows) - unless it, i) is from safe (tested) pasture, or ii) is turf from an endophyte-free species such as Kentucky bluegrass

Note to Reader: This article was originally intended for an audience in NE USA. The range of grass species infected by endophyte may vary in your area, as well as local effects from climate (drought) and standards adopted by your seed industry. It is recommended you seek advice from your forage specialist, extension agent or veterinarian to determine the suitability of turf species in your area. Remember also, that many camelids are raised on small farms, frequently originating from turf, and may have problems different from larger-scale grazing systems with traditional livestock species.

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