

Don't be scared of the big, bad fescue



Luke Nicholls dairy herd happily grazing a Hummer pasture.

Having once grazed 300 cows through a year of drought on just 23 hectares of tall fescue – the only green feed which could survive the heat and dry conditions – Luke Nicholls understands the value of fescue pastures.

So when he had an opportunity to trial a new, soft leaf tall fescue on his share farm near Sale, he took the chance.

Mr Nicholls farms at Pearsondale, milking 170 mostly Friesian cows on 40 hectares with Joe and Julie Scarfo.

“It took me some time to convince Joe to plant the new Hummer tall fescue down the back of the farm, because one of the front paddocks still had some old fescue in it and the cows wouldn't even look at it,” he said.

“Most dairy farmers won't grow fescue because they tried old varieties and they were so tough you couldn't cut them with a mower, let alone graze them.

“Those old varieties scared everyone away from fescues, but the newer varieties have a lot of advantages, especially when you choose a fine, softer leaf variety like Hummer.”

They planted one paddock in Hummer tall fescue in autumn 2012 and another two paddocks in autumn 2013, bringing the total area to nine hectares.

“The first paddock established well and although the next two were a bit slower, once established they have been able to take whatever comes along,” he said.

This has included floods, heat and a bit of neglect.

“The farm is fairly flat and it backs on to the La Trobe River, so some parts get a bit wet,” Mr Nicholls explained.

“Anytime there’s a decent rain, some of the back paddocks go under. On those paddocks, we can grow either fescue or weeds - those are the only options.”

He said the Hummer tall fescue tolerates waterlogging well, perhaps due to its deep roots, its ability to form a thatch and the MaxP® endophyte.

MaxP® is a novel tall fescue endophyte that improves the ability of tall fescue pastures to handle pest attack and moisture stress.

“We had one paddock under water for three weeks, and I mean 90cm under, and as soon as the water disappeared the Hummer started growing again,” said Mr Nicholls.

The pasture is ideal for hot summer environments with irrigation and will grow at temperatures up to 38°C.

“The Hummer fescue gives us more feed through summer than any ryegrass,” he said.

It also uses a lot less water.

Mr Nicholls is growing the fescue under a travelling irrigator which is “less than reliable” and as a result, it doesn’t get watered as often as it should.

“We don’t have a problem with keeping it green and growing, it doesn’t need the same level of care and attention as some other pastures,” he said.

And will the cows eat it?

“Actually it’s a lot softer than the older fescues and the cows will eat it no worries, once they’ve seen it two or three times,” he said.

“The milk production is the same as from a ryegrass, or if anything the milk might be slightly up by the time they have finished grazing the fescue.”

He said Hummer grows well from mid spring to autumn, covering a summer feed gap on the farm.

“Usually once we get into January, the ryegrass starts to slow right down and we get more from the fescue,” he said.

Hummer was selected for its fine, soft leaves, which allows grazing beyond optimal height and gives more flexibility in management.

Mr Nicholls said the grazing rotation was a bit quicker than with ryegrass, to stop the leaves from becoming too tough and prevent the seed setting.

Available this season, Hummer is ideal for hot, summer environments with irrigation, including dairy pastures.

For more information on Hummer, contact your local seed distributor.