

Establishing Tall Fescue

By Errol Thom, DairyNZ

It is more challenging to successfully establish tall fescue than ryegrass mainly because of its requirement for warm soils (12-15°C) and its slower seedling growth, increasing its susceptibility to competition for resources (light, water, nutrients, space) and from flat weeds and weed grasses such as *Poa*. Sowing in February/March in Waikato should meet the soil temperature requirements.

A fine, firm seed bed should be prepared and tall fescue seed sown (20-25 kg/ha) at a shallow depth (< 10mm), which is also suitable for companion species such as white clover (3 kg/ha). Rolling after sowing will be beneficial for conservation of moisture. The paddock to be sown should be soil tested for available nutrients and the required nutrients (e.g. P, K, S and lime) added before or during cultivation.

Available summer active tall fescue cultivars infected with the endophyte MaxP include Advance, Quantum II and Easton. Tall fescue has a higher temperature optimum for growth than does ryegrass (26 versus 20°C) and thus (combined with a more extensive root system) has a better tolerance of summer conditions than does ryegrass. MaxP endophyte provides some insect control (without animal health effects), but because it does not deter insect feeding until about 6 weeks from germination, treated seed should be sown to protect seedlings from insect attack during their first few weeks of growth. The risks of failure with early tall fescue sowings from the endophyte perspective are lessened by the fact that MaxP, living in tall fescue seed, will remain viable for a long time (for at least 6 weeks in one research trial).

Early seedling growth will benefit from application of nitrogen in the first 6 weeks from sowing and establishment will be greatly enhanced by the application of a clover friendly herbicide like 'Preside' to kill young broad-leaf weeds within about 3 weeks from sowing.