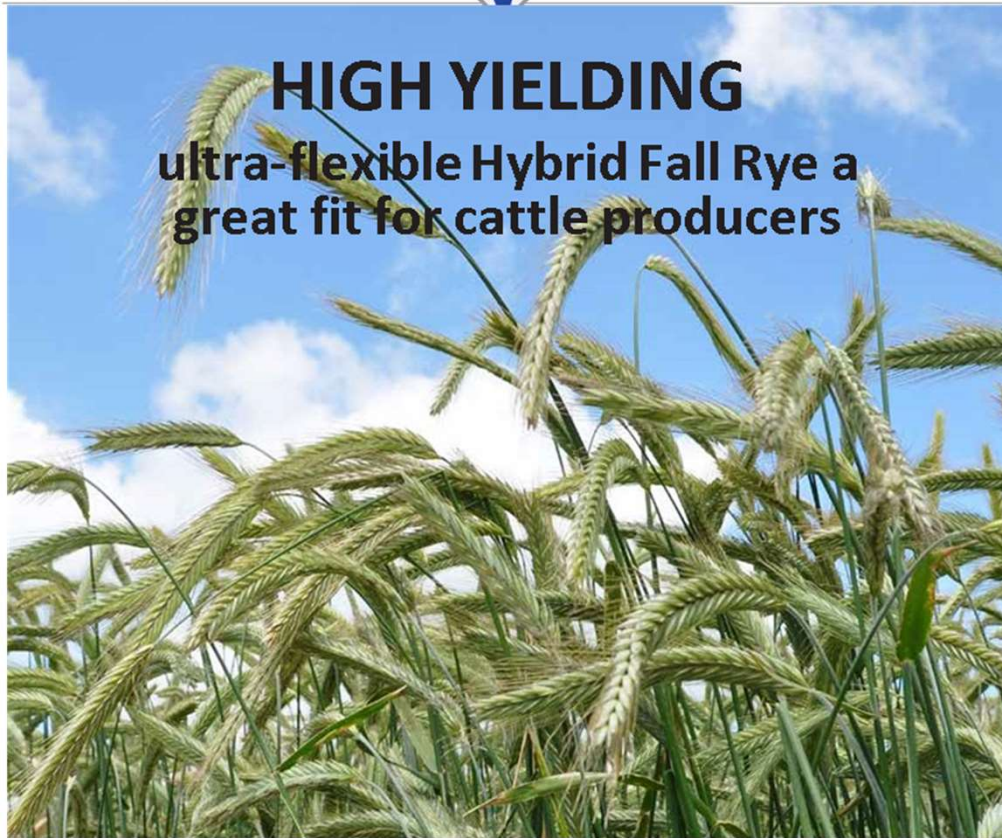




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*Hybrid Fall Rye ready to chop for silage.*

If you read the word 'rye' and assume low yields and few attractive benefits, get ready to have your mind changed. Plant breeding leader KWS, together with seed distributor FP Genetics, now offers four recent-to-Canada hybrid fall rye (HFR) varieties with impressive yield, lots of flexibility and, best of all, double cropping potential. Conventional rye technology has been relatively unchanged for years and, therefore, has fallen behind crops like canola, hard red wheat, and oats. Conventional rye just isn't that attractive to grow, which is why it's usually relegated to the worst land where farmers want to use a low-cost strategy to manage risk. That's about to change.

"For so long, rye has been treated as a weed, a cover crop, something extra but not a primary crop," says Dr. Becca Stokes, a live-stock nutritionist for KWS. "I encourage people to look at hybrid rye as a completely new crop. We start with these new, far superior genetics, and then we're talking precision ag, precision planting, managing it like the true high yielding crop that it is. At first producers are skeptical. When they see the science behind it and see that, not only is it comparable to other cereals for feed value, offers huge flexibility, then they get excited."

In Europe, HFR has been planted extensively for over 20 years and boasts very strong commercial uptake. Here at home, however, the crop, which was first introduced to the North American market only five years ago, is relatively unfamiliar to most Canadian producers. HFR is fairly similar to barley, triticale, and wheat for quality, though its somewhat higher sugar means it is slightly sweeter tasting. "We're looking at HFR as a replacement for barley or wheat, as we think it will perform very similarly in a feedlot situation," says Stokes. Jordan Kolk, operations manager for Kolk Farms Ltd., a feed yard near Iron Springs, Alberta, thinks HFR grown for silage has a clear fit in his rotation. "We've been growing fall rye since 2015," he says. "In terms of feed quality, I'd say it's been consistent with our winter wheat as long as it's taken early enough. Tonnage wise, we see probably a 20% advantage over spring cereals. What I really like about it, though, is it gives us the opportunity for a double crop. The hemp we grow for grain needs to be in the ground July 1. That's doable with fall rye because we can get silage off in June." HFR can be cut for silage at two stages. Cut at flag leaf, HFR silage will be an extremely high-quality silage with lots of green biomass. Crude protein will hit 15% or higher and digestibility can be in the 85%+ range due to low lignification and lower NDF (neutral detergent fiber). Comparatively, swath grazed barley's crude protein is typically about 13% and digestibility is about 75%. This means HFR cut at flag leaf increases dry matter intake and results in faster body-weight gain. The second option is to cut HFR silage at the milky stage. While its crude protein will be lower (generally in the 8-9% range) and lignification will have increased, cutting later typically doubles a producer's silage tonnage. Silage production trials by FP Genetics showed HFR produced 20 to 30% more than barley and 15% more than conventional rye in dry matter at the milky stage. "The decision on when to cut HFR for silage really depends on your production system," says Stokes. "If you need that high quality, high crude protein, you're going to cut at flag leaf. But if you're feeding where tonnage is a priority, it's better to cut at the milky stage." In order to get your cutting timing right, watch your HFR crop very carefully.



"HFR grows very quickly in the spring," says Stokes. "In a week it can get right through the flag leaf stage. If you're cutting other small grain cereal silage, that rapid growth means you can spread your workload by getting your HFR down before your other crops." HFR is planted between mid-August and mid-September and is ready for silage harvest in June or grain harvest in early August. The early silage harvest gives a producer like Kolk opportunity to optimize yield by planting a second crop late. "It fits in our rotation and fits with our operation," he says. "It's currently probably 20% of our forage program and, yes, we'll definitely continue. For us, it's a matter of risk management and managing inventories. We think it's a good tool, especially since there's always value in keeping a crop rotation diverse." Operating on sandy soils in Alberta's wind-prone south, Kolk also values HFR as a winter cover. While Kolk grows all of his HFR for silage, the crop can also be grown for grazing and/or grain. Many producers, in fact, seed it without being certain exactly how they'll ultimately use it: they might aim to harvest it as a grain or silage in June but, should they run out of other pasture crops, appreciate the flexibility of using it as a fall or early spring graze instead. "HFR offers another way to manage risk and workload. One year, a guy might need it to fill in holes in his grazing. Another year, he might realise his perennial pasture is doing fine into the fall, so he can just leave his HFR and use it in the spring. That kind of diverse flexibility can be really important when you're producing beef and you just don't know what a given year is going to throw at you," says Herman Wehrle, director of market development for FP Genetics, the company that distributes all of the hybrid rye varieties currently sold across Canada. Though it does take good management to execute, it is also possible to graze in fall or spring and achieve a silage crop as well, adds Stokes. Currently, FP Genetics, KWS and researchers at various institutions are conducting additional research on how to optimize HFR. "On the beef side, we're really early days," says Wehrle. "There are things we don't know yet in terms of management when you're mixing a forage or grazing with grain production. And, we have more to learn about double cropping too. We believe it's a bigger opportunity and that it could benefit farmers in a much wider geographic area than we first thought, but there's still work to be done." Wehrle expects continued, relatively moderate increases of HFR acreage over the next few years until interest reaches a critical mass. Then, he says, he expects it to really take off. "The feeding of cattle is always changing and evolving," adds Stokes. "The producers trying to be the best are constantly looking for new options and novel ways to be most efficient and cost effective. HFR definitely offers a viable way to feed cattle at an attractive cost. I expect more and more producers will be interested." HFR is currently available in Canada from Union Forage. ■