



Our Future: Alpaca Breed Standards or The Flip of the Coin?

By Mike Safley

Our Future: Alpaca Breed Standards or The Flip of the Coin?

The industry is making steady progress on breed standards. Only last year the old Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association, Inc. (AOBA) Board of Directors forced through an ill-advised by-law change that declared that there would be no alpaca breed standards established without two-thirds of the AOBA membership voting in favor of the proposed standard. As it turns out the Colorado Appeals court decided that the old Board of Directors had acted in a manner that was contrary to the Colorado statutes for non-profit corporations. The court reversed the Board of Directors' actions. The issue, of breed standards, is now back in play and the industry has some decisions to make.

The debate took a considerable step forward at the 2004 AOBA/ARI Fiber to Fashion Conference in Reno, Nevada. Curt Gedney, an ARI board member, organized a presentation on breed standards for the conference attendees. The panel discussion was moderated by Dr. David Ames of Colorado State University. The panel included Dr. John Edwards, Vice President of Express Ranch; the second largest supplier of cattle genetics in the United States; Zane Akins who spent thirteen years as the CEO of American Holstein Association; and Dr. Phil Sponenberg who serves as technical coordinator for the American Livestock Breeds Conservatory.

Dr. Ames began the evening by suggesting that the alpaca industry had the opportunity to create their vision of an ideal alpaca in the form of written standards, goals or guidelines. "The alternative," he said, "is to flip a coin about our future alpacas." The panel was asked to answer three questions about alpaca breed standards:

1. What experience have you had with breed standards in livestock organizations? Explain the extent to which you have seen a breed standard transform an industry. Please make note of problems encountered as well as successes.
2. How might a breed standard help the alpaca industry reach its goals? How do you think a breed standard would affect the current alpaca market as well as the long-term market for alpaca fiber?
3. How have other breed organizations approached the creation of a breed standard as an organization, and how might the alpaca industry approach this process?

The discussion that followed was direct and pointed. It was obvious to the audience that the panel had a wealth of experience with breed standards. As one attendee said to me, "They have been there and done that."

Zane Akins hit a line drive to the audience when he observed, "I want to tell you folks what I think you are thinking about breed standards. I believe that there are four prevalent opinions out there among you: 1) There are those of you who say, I am absolutely in favor of breed standards, 2) There are those of you who say, I want to learn more about breed standards, 3) Then there are those who say to themselves, "I don't care what they do, I am going to breed to my own standard," and 4) Finally, there are some of you that are going to fight breed standards to the bitter end.

No one in the audience disagreed with Zane's assessment.

Later in the program Mr. Akins, who helped pioneer performance pedigrees and the establishment of estimated progeny differences in the Holstein industry, told the following story about his experiences with advocating standards for dairy cows.

Back when I was a young man, working for the Holstein association, I put on a series of meetings to explain some changes in the performance standards for Holsteins. When I finished my presentation to the audience a man stood up and said, "I want you to know that I have opposed every change that you guys have ever proposed involving my cows. And I am going to oppose this change as well because I want to keep my record clean. But I also want to thank you for all the

Our Future: Alpaca Breed Standards or The Flip of the Coin?

positive changes in our breed that have resulted from your proposals over the years.”

“That was thanks enough,” said Zane.

Dr. John Edwards made a point dear to my heart when he told the audience that there was no way a judge could judge livestock without an ideal animal pictured in his mind. And without a standard or some sort written of description being set out that it would be near to impossible for anyone to judge livestock. I personally believe that a lack of a standard creates uneven show results in the alpaca show ring.

A question and answer period followed the panel’s presentation. One of the panel members listened to several of the questions before he observed that he believed that the common underlying concern in the questions was “a fear of losing” if breed standards were established. He went on to say that, while he did not believe that it would be the case, he felt that alpaca breeders needed to set aside their personal concerns for the betterment of the breed.

I joined several AOBA Board of Directors members and other concerned alpaca breeders in opposing the old Board of Directors’ action by filing what came to be known as the “intervener’s lawsuit.” The lawsuit took issue with the Board of Directors’ action to make a bylaw change that made it very difficult to establish breed standards for alpacas. The “interveners” were made up of people that both supported and opposed breed standards. But, they universally agreed that the old Board of Directors had acted outside the authority given them in the AOBA bylaws when they approved a vote to amend the bylaws. The Colorado court agreed.

I personally believe that the issue of breed standards belongs in the AOBA show rules rather than in the bylaws of the association. The “interveners” took quite a bit of heat for their stance. One author went so far as to call the lawsuit “frivolous” in a recently published book about alpacas. But all of that is behind us now. The question becomes what is next on the issue of alpaca breed standards?

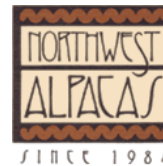
I have made numerous breed standard presentations to audiences over the past few years and I always advocate for breed standards. The people who take issue with me almost always argue that breed standards might hurt individual breeders in the marketplace. I believe that any initiative that makes alpacas more productive in the long run will ultimately benefit every breeder. I do not at all agree that breed standards will hurt individual breeders. Breed standards are a herd improvement tool.

In Reno the panel members made it clear that, for breed standards to be successfully established in our industry, there has to be “buy in.” The members must feel that standards are inclusive not exclusive. And whatever goals, guidelines or standards that are adopted must allow for change and become an evolving document.

What’s next? I would like to see a task force appointed by the ARI and AOBA Boards of Directors. I think the task force should include a representative of each of the affiliates; a board member from AOBA and ARI; a member of the Alpaca Show Rules Committee; a member of the Judges Training Committee and; one or two senior alpaca judges. I also would like to see the continuing participation of the panel led by Dr. Ames.

I would hope that the task force could meet in Kentucky at the 2004 AOBA convention. They would be charged with creating a process for examining the issue of breed standards.

In the end I would urge that the process result in a Breed Type Conference held at the 2005 joint ARI/AOBA Fiber to Fashion Conference in Orlando, Florida. Dr. Ames says that these types of conferences are the



Our Future: Alpaca Breed Standards or The Flip of the Coin?

traditional vehicle for livestock breeds who wish to establish or update breed standards. A typical conference would last for a day or two and would allow all of the “stakeholders” to have their say.

Once the conference was complete the industry could decide whether or not to adopt standards and if so, what the standards should look like. It is like the saying on Fox News, “You Decide.”

Related links:

[Standards by Thomas Shaw](#)

[A Comparative Analysis of Alpaca Breed Standards](#)

[Australian Alpaca Association Breed Standards](#)