

Fleece Preparation from a Processor's Point of View

*by Rod Dakan
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You have spent months and years of hard work and now it's time to shear your Alpaca. What can you do to maximize the return on your effort? What if anything can be done to insure that the highest percentage of your fleece is used at the processor?

Fleece preparation begins with pasture management.

Paddock rotation is imperative to good pasture management. When moving animals from one paddock to another I would then clean up manure piles and mow the remaining grass. If the animals didn't eat it this time they most likely will not eat it the next time they are put in the paddock. Mowing keeps the grass short and sweet. It also helps to control weeds. While you are mowing cut any thistle and other weeds. Mowing also breaks up any small tree branches and pine needles so that they mulch into the grass. Keeping pastures well watered and fertilized will limit the number of dustbins for the animals to play in. If your animals insist on rolling in the dirt then keep the dirt clean of any wood chips and other foreign matter.

There are many good articles on pasture management. One source of help is your local Agricultural extension agent.

One suggestion that I read about recently is to use the sponge rollers that you find in the car wash as rubbing posts for your Alpacas. You might find them used when your local car wash replaces theirs. It seems that they just want to itch and if given an opportunity to

scratch that itch they will not roll. I would appreciate hearing about any who use these scratching posts and any other ideas that you might have. What a dream that would be for both the shearer and the processor to have animals free from dirt and debris.

I am convinced that processors most likely have their whole fee schedule backwards. We charge the highest portion of the total package on the spinning end when we spend far more effort and equipment expense cleaning fiber than in the spinning. We believe that our finished product can be no better than how clean we can get the fiber. So goes the old adage "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." Some of you may not know that sheep do not roll so the cleaning of wool is mostly just getting the lanolin free from the fiber. The lanolin also acts as a barrier to Vegetable Matter (VM) from getting into the fiber. The wool is also scoured with chemicals that will dissolve most anything in the fiber leaving it clean but harsh. If we treated Alpaca or Llama with such chemicals we would destroy all your breeding efforts.

Fleece preparation at shearing time.

We recommend that you use a vacuum system rather than a blower. I would rather see the dirt and VM taken away from the fiber than blown deeper. Your Shearer will appreciate all your efforts as well. His equipment will stay sharper longer if he doesn't have to cut through dirt and VM. The sharper the clippers are the fewer second cuts will be made.

Remember that the first thing that your processor will do is to wash the fiber. The crimp that you are all trying to breed into the fiber is part of the structure of the individual hair and when washed and dried it is still there. I have seen fiber so crimped that following washing and drying it is difficult to pull apart. It's like trying to pull apart Velcro. That is wonderful fiber to work with at the spinning frame but it is the most difficult fiber to get clean because the crimp hangs onto anything and everything.

Also remember that the tare or that portion of the shipment that is not spun into yarn is the most expensive portion of your shipment. For example if you ship 100 pounds of fiber to the mill and 10% is dirt and VM you have paid freight and

washing fees on 10 pounds of nothing. Over a ten-year period that would be a significant amount of money. It all comes from the bottom line of your operation. The goal should be to send 100% usable fiber. You will not reach that goal but there is something for you to shoot at.

The time you spend skirting the fleece prior to packing is time well spent. Let's say you are able to reduce the percentage of tare by only 2%. At current freight costs and washing fees that would save \$13.00 on a 100 pound shipment. \$13 an hour is not bad when the alternative is to pay your processor that \$13. Quite frankly we would rather not have to work so hard to get the fiber clean.

There is some concern on our part that the excess VM and dirt in the shipment will damage the fiber. This is not a known quantity but if it could be quantified at let's just guess 1% of the shipment then you are losing another pound of your shipment that falls to the floor of the processor's mill as fiber too short to spin and ends up in the trash bin to dirty to felt. Again that's not a lot but as your ranch grows and you ship more fiber well? And consider the loss over a period of years. A pound here and a pound there and pretty soon we are talking major money.

I can't say it often enough all your efforts to ship clean fiber will pay many returns.

What do we do to clean your fleece?

The first process is to determine the processing schedule. That schedule is in large part controlled by how clean the fiber is when we receive it. If it is very dirty then we will re-skirt it and that takes time. We have found that if we can get the dirt and VM out of the fleece before we wash it we are way ahead of the game. At present we are not charging for this process but should it become a major item I'm sure that we will have to figure out a way to recover the cost.

Next the fiber is washed. We have developed a method that we believe removes more dirt and VM than traditional methods while at the same time treating the fiber as gently as possible. The detergents are biodegradable and are so gentle we do not have to use gloves when washing. Traditional scouring methods use very harsh chemicals designed to dissolve

Fiber FUNDAMENTALS

lanolin, dirt and VM within the fibers. These chemicals are so harsh that operators must wear gloves, aprons, and in some cases masks.

Next the fiber is opened with a picker. This process opens the locks, separating the individual fibers from one another. We have even pre-picked some fiber that was extremely dirty. Some fibers tend to mat at the tips and if those are not opened then the washing will not get the dirt out. It's kind of like telling a kid to wash behind their ears, they can be clean all over but if they are dirty behind the ears. WELL?

Because of our commitment to the cleanliness of the fiber 99% of the fiber

we process then goes to the fiber separator. See picture. The separator will remove VM and guard hair leaving us with just the soft fiber to spin. If the fiber contains bits of VM with jagged edges which hang on to the fiber it must be run through the separator a number of times. All of which is expensive. Things which we don't like to see in fiber are sawdust, wood chips, tumble weeds, thistle, and burrs of any kind. If it can hook to the fiber then the processor doesn't like it.

Only when we are satisfied that we have removed 99.9% of the hair and VM will the fiber proceed to the card and then to the spinning frame.

It is my hope that this short article will give you the incentive to spend just a little extra time on fleece preparation. Remember we are in a fiber business and our customers don't understand the problems we have in providing them the clean and ultra soft yarn that they desire. They only know that if they can feel the itch they will not buy it.



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