

I have been in the alpaca business for nine years and have been a supporter of the alpaca industry on multiple levels. I was prompted to write in response to the cover of the recent edition of Alpaca Culture featuring alpaca as meat. This is not to fault Alpaca Culture for covering the topic. In fact I applaud you for putting it in print. However I would like to address alpaca meat's role in the overall alpaca industry in the US as of 2014.

If you follow any chat rooms or social networks over the past year you might notice there has been a rather remarkable change in person's views of eating alpaca. Five years ago a discussion of alpaca as meat would have been taboo but today it is one of the most openly and frequently discussed topics. It has practically become, excuse the pun, "dinner chat." I don't propose that alpaca meat should not be used as an end product. However I have questions about its overwhelming acceptance to the exclusion of other topics at this point in our commercial alpaca growth and industry.

I recognize the importance of both a commercial industry and a cottage market. My response is primarily in regard to the commercial industry. Every industry has an end product. In the alpaca industry we refer to the fiber or fleece and subsequent manufacture into garments as the end product. There are also secondary end products. For example dairy cattle are raised primarily for their milk but at some point they are culled from the herd and processed for meat. I do not see the commercial alpaca industry as any different but I would point out that the alpaca meat is a secondary end product and not a primary one. It certainly is not a good business model to solely promote alpaca meat for multiple reasons. I fear that we are putting the cart before the horse in enthusiastically grasping the meat industry when we have yet to build or even address the fiber industry.

For years we've been talking about the worth of raising alpacas. Our answers to common questions typically include such phrases as "we don't have a garment industry because we don't have enough alpacas in the US. Alpaca growth is so slow because of their long gestation. And right now everyone wants to be at the top of the pyramid as a breeder." All true statements, however the number of alpacas in the US suggests a slowing in growth.

When are we going to take the steps toward a commercial alpaca fiber and garment industry? When are we going to start enthusiastically talking about other topics such as embryonic transfer (ET) and what it could do for the industry? The females who are fantastic breed stock except for poor fleece or conformation would make great ET recipients. Those females would not be culled from the herd at a young age and could continue to contribute to the fiber industry in a great way.

Right now there are many young males that are not herdsires and those males are either sold/given away or kept as pets or culled from the herd as meat. We aren't using their fiber to the fullest as there is no easy market for the fiber.

In most industries, a person can research a selling price or range. It is not possible to follow alpaca fleece commodity prices in the US. Subsequently, it is extremely difficult to formulate an accurate business plan with income/expense numbers and profit margins.

How to get a fiber market? I believe it is going to take a large investment realizing that the return on investment will take unknown years to achieve. One thing our national organization could do is to work on funding such a project by looking for investors, grants and providing financial support to those wanting to get into the commercial end of the fiber industry. That is a huge statement but certainly in our alpaca community we have members who have taken the steps toward a start up business. I believe the regional affiliations are instrumental in working toward this goal in cooperation with our national organization. I would suggest that a portion of our membership dues be put that end. Also, as an example, money raised in Herdsire Breeding Auctions could be awarded as a grant to an eligible person or group working toward stated goals. We must have the same enthusiasm for the fiber and garment industry as we now have for marketing alpacas as breeding stock.

The registry as it stands now has a major affect on the commercial industry. And by introducing Embryonic Transfer, we will need to make changes to our registry system. A simple acknowledgement of ET on the registry might be all that is necessary. Our current system of registration for an alpaca denotes simply parental lineage. It states nothing of quality. I propose that registration should follow certain conformation/health criteria confirmed by a licensed veterinarian in order to become registered.

Our registry system would change and would hopefully come in alignment with other livestock registry systems. Many in this day and age have foregone registering their alpacas, thus skewing the actual number of alpacas in the US. The registry should have a tract where alpaca owners could submit, free of charge, their annual herd counts. Alternatively, the registry could lower prices in an effort to get more alpacas accounted for in the registry.

In closing these are my thoughts. Our industry will not survive by continued selling of alpacas if the end product is not easily marketable. Let's start looking to our future as a commercial fiber industry as is done in other parts of the world. The US has some of the very best alpacas worldwide. It is up to us to take the opportunity and use it to the fullest potential. Thank you for your time.

Best Regards

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