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AAFL FLEECE FLYER 1/2005

There has been much discussion about what is, and what is not, superfine alpaca fleece. We at AAFL acknowledge the need to provide clearer guidelines to growers for all our priced fleece lines. Firstly we all have customers – and customer needs just have to be our most vital focus. (Of course we recognise fleece growers as an important part of the AAFL supply chain, but without satisfied downstream fleece buyers, none of us can survive as a fleece industry.) Here are a few points to consider when classifying alpaca fleece as superfine.

By the time superfine fleece is scoured it *costs \$75.50 per kg*, based on March 2005 prices paid to growers and current scouring costs. This is about the same price for superfine (super style and character, sound) merino wool and some de-haired cashmere. Superfine wool also has a very much lower coefficient of variation (CV) for both fibre length and fibre diameter - a very important selling point.

Thus even the best current alpaca fleece is nowhere near as even for micron or length as equivalent grades of merino wool or cashmere, and still always contains some medullated fibre (guard hair, or kemp). If you doubt this look at any merino bale test report and compare the CVs!

Because our current scoured cost price is so high, to attain a selling price sufficient to generate a modest profit after sales costs we must exploit the natural characteristics of alpaca to help overcome areas of deficiency (greater CV and guard hair). We do this by ensuring that superfine fleece lots display excellent style and character, the best possible evenness for micron and length throughout the whole fleece, and most importantly, extreme softness of handle. ***Thus average micron alone is not a true indicator of superfine fleece (of any type).***

Length refers to the average length of the staple as well as the whole fleece. Obviously a long tapering fibre tip will give a very wide variation in length in each staple. This is a characteristic of all cria fleece and is acceptable to a degree - but there is a limit. Regardless of popular conception, most cria fleeces are between 80-110mm in length and we class accordingly. Fleeces of 120-150mm are too long for most commercial processing capability, and destroy the low CV for length needed to gain a premium price.

In summary, the comparatively high prices offered for superfine alpaca fibre leave no room for error. For example, a particular problem is that many cria fleeces have a tender tip to the staple. This represents a loss of useable fibre through a decrease in length, and thus an increase in the cost to the processor.

Micron testing is a very interesting subject. Look for the article published by Bruce McGregor, specialty fibre scientist at the Victorian Institute of Animal Science. Bruce has a vast experience in all facets of animal and fibre research and has provided consultancy advice to the AAA. The article is in 'Alpacas Australia', Issue 40, Autumn 2003 edition, page 11. Please also see the February 2005 Paper on a comparative study of alpaca fibre testing machines by Dr I Davison and Mr C Holt now on the AAA Website.

There are many kinds of testing machines and all will give slightly different results. Even the same machine will often give a different result on a re-tested sample. Do we know whether the various testing machines around Australia have been calibrated to test alpaca? (Some may not need calibrating.) What is the margin of error in the tests? How do we know they are accurate?

The fleece can vary significantly from mid-side to shoulder to back and haunch. Some research suggests up to 8 microns variation across these locations. Of course we know breeders are trying hard to reduce this variation with each generation, along with greatly reducing the guard hair problem, but there is still a great deal of improvement needed. Our experience indicates this variation across the skirted fleece is currently about 3-5 microns. Consequently in classing for optimum return for growers we sometimes split individual fleeces into two grades. (Please note that in such cases it can be impossible for a grower to identify individual fleeces in their clip report.)

Most breeders understand that a mid-side sample test provides only a rough guide to the average characteristics of the whole skirted fleece. Mid-side micron testing is of course a very important tool in selecting animals and following their progress over the years, especially in consistently sampling in the same location as the alpaca ages, and for comparison across the herd. ***But careful interpretation with visual criteria is needed to assess other important characteristics, the most vital to the processor being medullated fibre.***

An example of the accuracy problem of mid-side testing was the 'golden bale' originally produced for AAFMO. All fleeces in the 'golden bale' had a mid-side test result MFD of 18.5 microns or finer. But when AWTA independently core-tested the bale for the Co-op the overall average fineness was ***21.6 microns!***

Handling our growers' clips is a big responsibility and we try to class as accurately as we can for the grower. However we must also keep in mind the importance of the natural features of alpaca fleece that will give us the premium we require, as well as the processing rules we must adhere to so processors can achieve their expected spinning results.

The AAFL Board hopes that alpaca fleece suppliers will think about the matters raised in this Flyer. We also understand the need to communicate better and more often with industry members. All comments and suggestions on any aspect of alpaca fleece supply, processing and marketing will be welcomed.

Finally, we have begun a series of short workshop visits to AAA Regions to discuss alpaca fleece issues and concerns with growers, and to demonstrate practical classing aspects. Early indications are that attendees have found these sessions very helpful.