

Multiple Species Fiber Farming

Ideas on how to make a fiber farm pay its way

Differences and similarities between sheep and camelids that affect small farm profitability

A. Longevity (reproductive years)

- **Sheep : +/- 8 years**
- **Camelids: +/- 17 years**

- **Age is one of the primary factors in fleece quality**
- **Often determines amount of “attachment” owners feel towards the animal.**

B. Dual purpose (wool and meat)

- **Sheep – Absolutely. Pelts, too.**
- **Camelids– you’re joking, right?**
 - **Alpacas (in the U.S.) are one of very few non-dual purpose fiber animals.**
 - **In South America: Robust market for alpaca meat and pelts that accompanies the fiber industry.**

Dual purpose allows for more rapid selection for the desired characteristics than fiber-only species

C. Reproduction rate /AI efficacy

- **Sheep: normally one set of twins /year**
 - triplets common, occasionally quads /quints (Finn sheep)
 - accelerated breeding programs possible with some breeds
 - Artificial insemination – fairly common and generally successful



- **Reproduction rate / AI efficacy affect how quickly breeders can make desired genetic changes**

C. Reproduction rate /AI efficacy

- **Camelids- normally one cria per year**
 - **Twins rare**
 - **Artificial insemination – undergoing development - problematic due to nature of camelid semen**
- **Reproduction rate / AI efficacy affect how quickly breeders can make desired genetic changes**

D. Sale of live animals

Sheep – relatively easy to sell

- At a variety of ages (lambs, yearlings, brood ewes, fiber animals, culls)
- At a variety of venues (off the farm, shows, auction barns, Internet)
- For a variety of purposes (meat, breeding, fiber)
- For a variety of prices (\$75 to \$15K, most under \$800, trending generally upward to match producers costs)
- “Trending” breeds/types more costly (Current craze: Valais Blacknose)
- Supply tracks demand fairly closely
- Large producers (meat and fine wool) affected greatly by international markets

D. Sale of live animals

Camelids– History of boom and bust in sales

- At a variety of ages (yearlings, breeding age)
- At a variety of venues (off farm, shows, auctions, Internet)
- For a variety of purposes (breeding, pets, fiber, guardians)
- For a variety of prices (free to \$250k, most under \$5k)
- Sometimes marketed as “investment- grade” livestock
- “Trending” breeds/types more costly
- Overall current supply seems to be somewhat greater than demand, certain breeds excepted
- U.S. sales not significantly affected by international markets

D. Sale of live animals

Some challenges to selling camelids

- **Price (too high and too low)**
- **Longevity**
- **Perception of being exotic / not practical**
- **Spitting videos on YouTube**
- **Training requirements (particularly llamas)**
- **Poor buyer experiences in the past with over-marketed or undertrained animals / misinformation / no service after sales, etc.**

E. Nature of Sheep wool vs. Camelid fiber

Shared characteristics

- **Natural fibers**
- **Excellent insulating qualities, even when wet**
- **Resist odor retention in garments**
- **Affected by age, diet, environment, reproductive status, and health of the animal.**



Sheep Wool

- **Solid structure**
- **Lanolin content increases with fineness**
- **Wider range of fiber diameter (FD) across breeds**
- **Higher profile scales**
- **Requires chemical polishing (“Superwash”) to match best alpaca**

Camelid Fiber

- **Hollow structure**
- **No lanolin**
- **Narrower range of FD (suris coarser than huacayas)**
- **Smoother scales**
- **Higher grades are naturally finer /smoother than most wool**

Sheep Wool

- Absorbs up to 50% of its weight in water
- More crimp range
- No guard hair (most wool breeds)
- Maintains FD as animal ages (may get finer)
- Less tensile strength
- More bending strength
- More “memory”

Camelid Fiber

- Water repellent / dries quickly
- Less crimp range (suris - no appreciable crimp)
- Variable amounts of guard hair present
- FD increases as animal ages
- More tensile strength
- Less bending strength
- Less “memory” (generally requires more twist to achieve same gauge yarn)

F. Economics of Wool vs. Camelid Fiber

Common to both wool and fiber:

- **Fleeces can be sold raw or at some stage of processing**
- **Fleeces can be sold directly to consumer (handspinner) or in large commercial lots (usually for a lesser price)**
- **Price for raw fleece greatly influenced by grade, condition, cleanliness and storage**
- **Can be shorn professionally or by owner (costs involved both ways)**

F. Economics of Wool vs. Camelid Fiber

Wool

- Many sheep can be blanketed (but coats cost time / money)
- Sheep do not roll (not intentionally, anyway)
- Wool cannot be cleaned up much prior to shearing
- Sheared for \$5 to \$10/head



Fiber

- Camelids rarely blanketed
- Camelids love to roll
- Camelids can be brushed/blown prior to shearing (greatly enhances value)
- Sheared for \$25/head and up.



F. Economics of Wool vs. Camelid Fiber

Wool

- Raw, clean handspinner grade fleeces fetch \$9 -\$35 lb (Romney \$9 -\$12, BFL \$20 to \$25, Teeswater and Merino \$30 -\$35)
- Shorn usually every 9-10 months
- Each sheep on our farm should produce \$60 to \$120/ year in fleece sales alone (Romney, BFL, Teeswater)



Fiber

- For fiber, \$3 to \$5 per oz (according to alpaca.com)
- Shorn once annually
- In theory, each alpaca should producer over \$400/year in fleece sales alone.



G. Some challenges to fleece profits

- **Poor management of fleece (contaminants, weak fleeces, bad storage, etc.)**
- **Maintenance of non-profitable animals**
- **Lack of selection pressure for desired fleece characteristics**
- **Marketing obstacles**
 - **Price (supply and demand)**
 - **Buyer unfamiliarity**
 - **Lack of access to buyers / lack of advertising / isolation**
 - **Poor record keeping (product / customer data)**

Suggestions for increasing farm income

- **Speak with one voice as much as possible / don't speak poorly of other breeders**
- **Develop and recognize distinct breeds for different uses**
- **Find a market niche that works for you and move in**
- **Use shows for marketing as well as for display and competition**

Suggestions for increasing farm income

- **Research your costs of production and price accordingly**
- **Encourage networking between members, farms, other parts of the fiber industry (Referrals!)**
- **Combine products (blends) for added value**
- **Contact mills as a possible market for non-handspinning grade fleeces (at bulk pricing)**

Suggestions for increasing farm income

- **Develop a variety of products to draw people to your operation (compost, straw, eggs, or, dare I say it...pelts?)**
- **Join like-minded Facebook groups**
- **Create and maintain a website. Keep it current.**
- **To the extent possible, reduce the number of “carried” animals in your operation**

Questions?

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