



The **ROLE** of the **PRE-PURCHASE EXAMINATION** in the ALPACA INDUSTRY

By John M. Pollock, DVM

Over the past decade the alpaca industry has surged. Currently, it is not uncommon for individual animals to command tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of dollars on the open market. As the financial commitment to an individual animal increases, so does the purchaser's liability should the animal have a medical problem, genetic defect, or physical ailment. While no one would consider purchasing a home without a thorough and complete home inspection, many people entering the alpaca industry do so without consulting their veterinarian for a prepurchase examination. Prepurchase examinations are commonplace in the equine industry, and serve to protect buyers not only from less than honest horse dealers, but also from honestly naïve sellers. With the monetary value of individual alpacas increasing to the level of their equine counterparts, it is somewhat alarming that the prepurchase examination has not become more commonplace within the camelid industry.

A prepurchase examination allows the buyer to be informed of the current health status of the animal of interest. Many animals are purchased over the internet or from magazines on the basis of show history, bloodlines, and an attractive photo advertisement. While traits like

genetic quality and show record are certainly important considerations when purchasing an animal, they become less important if the animal is in poor health at the time of sale. Not only is the buyer risking a poor investment on an unhealthy animal, they may also be risking the health of the rest of their herd if the animal is then introduced to the home farm.

In veterinary medicine there is no set standard for what should be included in a prepurchase examination, so you should discuss with your veterinarian what his or her examination includes. At a minimum, your veterinarian will likely perform a thorough physical examination. The physical examination allows your veterinarian to gather an overall sense of the health and condition of the animal you wish to purchase, and may reveal subtle abnormalities that may lead you to pursue further diagnostics prior to purchasing a particular animal.

Depending on the buyer and what information is important to him/her, it may be prudent to have your veterinarian perform additional tests prior to bringing any animals onto your property. A reproductive examination, including an ultrasound to confirm pregnancy, is highly recommended in females that are being purchased as pregnant breeding stock. Fecal egg counts may be rec-



A thorough physical exam may reveal...

- **Congenital heart defects and persistent murmurs**
- **Musculoskeletal and conformational defects**
- **Contagious external parasites**
- **Congenital defects (umbilical/inguinal hernia, cleft palate, wry tail, etc.)**
- **Poor body condition score**

ommended to screen for high parasite burdens in any animals being introduced to your herd. A CBC (complete blood count) can screen for anemia (parasites, mycoplasma haemolama, iron deficiency, chronic disease) or changes in the white blood cell count that may indicate an infectious problem in the animal. A chemistry panel evaluates general organ function and may be indicated in certain cases.

Any animal being moved across state lines also requires that a veterinarian issue a health certificate. A health certificate is not a prepurchase examination! It is a certificate of veterinary inspection on an official form of the state of origin that identifies the animal, contains results of any required tests, lists required vaccines, and certifies that the animal exhibits no obvious signs of contagious or infectious diseases. It is a form used to prevent the importation of animals that may be harboring infectious diseases that could present a health threat to the livestock, native wildlife and human populations of that state and therefore, does not replace a prepurchase examination. Certain states require particular infectious disease testing prior to the issuance of a health certificate. Recommended or required infectious disease testing for the purpose of the health certificate/prepurchase examination may include proof of negative brucellosis, TB (tuberculosis) test, bluetongue virus, and BVD (Bovine Viral Diarrhea) PCR.

Whenever possible, it is also ideal for the buyer or an agent of the buyer to visit the farm before purchase and to be present at the prepurchase examination. This has many advantages. First of all, having the buyer present during the prepurchase examination allows the veterinarian to discuss any findings directly at the time of examination. This also allows the buyer the opportunity to ask questions and ultimately make the most informed decision prior to making a purchase. Visiting the farm allows the buyer to interact with the animals and observe their behavior with people and their herdmates. While on the farm the buyer can assess how the farm and the animals are managed and look at an animal's individual medical record. A potential buyer should be observing the farm's feeding practices and stocking densities. They should look to see if animals are grouped together or separated by age, sex, and/or reproductive status. If there is a frequent influx of new animals from outside sources, is there an isolation/quarantine pen, and are the animals kept in that pen for an adequate length of time?

Prospective buyers must understand that the veterinarian is unable to predict the future and cannot provide a guarantee of the animal's future health and/or breeding soundness. The veterinarian is not able to appraise the value of the animal and cannot make predictions about the buyer's ability to resell the animal or its offspring at a later date. The job of the veterinarian is not to "pass" or "fail" any given animal. Rather, he or she is assisting the buyer in making an informed decision about the general health of the animal they are interested in purchasing. Ultimately, a prepurchase examination with the aid of your veterinarian can be used as a positive tool to help protect the interests of all parties involved, and help prevent communication errors, future displeasure, and possible litigation.

John Pollock is an assistant professor at the Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. He enjoys teaching students in a clinical setting at their large animal ambulatory service in Woodstock, Connecticut where his special interests include small ruminants and alpacas.