

# Resource Concerns and Your Alpaca Farm

By Nancy Ferlow

**As an advisor to farmers** on environmental concerns, I have seen many issues arise. These issues can be handled before neighbors become irate and call the Department of Environmental Protection or the Department of Health. The first thing you need to do is — think like your neighbors. You don't want to see dirty water, stinking manure or flies everywhere. Neither do they. One of the major tools for looking at environmental issues is a resource assessment.

You start a basic resource assessment by walking around your farm, preferably in the pouring rain. In the rain you see where the water is going. You can then tell if there is dirt or manure in the water as it leaves your property. The major issues that I see often are erosion from poorly maintained pastures or manure from wet piles flowing into the streams and wetlands. These have adverse impacts on the water quality — some of it visible and some of it not. Dirty water is an issue but so are extra nutrients in the water that can cause algal blooms and hypoxia down stream.

From your walk you have an idea where the water is going. Then look at your farm layout. Is the manure pile close to where the water flows? Does the pasture have bare spots where erosion can occur? Do the alpacas wade in the stream and break down the banks so more erosion occurs? Does the runoff from the roof flow through the pasture? Are there gullies along the animal trails?

All of these can lead to a water quality problem in the future.

The main advice is to keep the clean water clean, minimize the amount of manure that is on the ground and uncovered, and treat any dirty water before it gets off your farm. There are a myriad of ways you can accomplish this. Store the manure in a covered area. Compost the manure in a covered compost area. Spread the manure or compost at a time when plants are available to take up the nutrients.

Spread the manure according to the soil test results and nutrient needs of the plants. Move the manure off the

farm. Put gutters on the roof and outlet them where the animals are not allowed. Divert any clean surface water runoff away from manure and paddock areas. Make sure that the bare spots in the pastures are kept to a minimum. Fence the animals out of the stream.

A proper pasture management plan is a must. Do you know which pasture your alpacas are in now? Do you know which pasture they were in last week? Do you know where they are going next? Do you have a good water source that is not the stream? Do you have an area that is mucky in the spring? I recommend a good rotational grazing system. A rotational grazing system is both an art and a science. The science says that animals eat so much per day, that there are so many groups of animals that must be moved in a certain pattern (if you keep your males separated), that the water source is in a certain spot, that a certain group must be kept in view at all times — whatever your conditions are. The art is the layout of the pastures and watching the grass grow to know when and where to move the animals. Recordkeeping is a must.

Much can be done with portable fences and watering troughs. Ideally, the animals are turned into a paddock when the grass is 4 — 6 inches high and removed when the grass is 2 inches high. There should be enough feed for the animals to graze comfortably for the period allotted but eat most of the plants down to the two inch level. Some places start the rotations with the animals with the most nutritional needs — pregnant or nursing females — and follow these with the animals with lesser nutritional needs. You may desire to keep certain groups at a further distance so a parallel grazing system may be in order.

Clipping after each pasture is finished may be necessary to keep the weeds from displacing the desirable species. Creatures have a tendency to eat what they like first and only eat the plants that they are not fond of at a later time. Clipping can control those plants if they get out of control. Occasionally, a spot treatment may be needed for the most tenacious species or those that are poisonous.

Proper attention to the details of pasture and waste management can help avert many problems. Occasionally, just keeping manure storages and compost facilities out of sight of the neighbors can help. If the road frontage you show to the public is objectionable, people may automatically assume that the rest of your operation is a problem should flies, odor or water quality issues arise.

If you have questions or would like assistance in resource assessments and pasture planning, please contact your local NRCS office. There may be programs available to assist with technical advice and with costs of eligible projects on your farm.

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