

Preparing Your Fleeces for Processing

By *Caecilia Goetze*

Shearing time is just around the corner and I imagine some will feel overwhelmed when faced with all that shorn fibre. I know, because I had that, “Oh my goodness, what do I do with all that fleece?” not knowing where to start feeling some years ago. How I wished for some guidance and training to tell me how to handle the fleece harvest and avoid some costly mistakes. I hope this article will reduce the anxiety and help you to handle your fibre clip.

When a shearer is hired there is not much time for thorough fleece preparation. If you need to do this at another time, have white tissue paper ready to place on top of the blanket before rolling it up and bagging it.

Nothing is more frustrating than attempting to unroll a blanket that has been hastily stuffed into a bag at shearing time. Rolled up fleece stick together; inserting paper prevents that and makes unrolling easier.

Use only white tissue paper as the coloured paper can bleed when put between a damp fleece. If fleece is damp when bagged, take it out as soon as you can and let it dry. A nice sunny day with no breeze dries the fleeces very quickly.

A 4'x6' sorting table with 1" chicken wire mesh makes it easier to work the



fleeces. The added advantage is that second cut pieces fall through the 1" openings. Wire mesh seems to be better than plastic as the plastic can create a lot of static. Placing the sorting table at a comfortable height will help prevent too much strain on your back. Standing on rubber mats offers more comfort as well. I like to work with two sorting tables; on one I spread the entire blanket fleece and the other I spread all other fleece sections. I have marked one table with the different sections (e.g. neck, front middle leg, back middle leg, etc) on the wooden frame to remind me which is which.

Fleece growth on the alpaca varies in fineness, length, colour and presence and absence of guard hair. This variation makes it necessary to separate those sections for their attributes and planned end use.

We separate blanket, neck and upper leg and bag it into three separate bags. The lower leg and belly fibre are normally discarded because they tend to be very hairy. Discarding the apron area will depend on the degree of hairiness. Sometimes cria aprons can be mixed with sorted fibre designated to be either dehaired or made into felt batts.

Before we start shearing an alpaca we take a sample from the midsection (half way between shoulder and rump, and half way between topline and belly) at skin level and place it into a labeled zip loc bag. We take a good handful, enough for fibre analysis and for show and tell. As the



sections are sheared and bagged, I weigh each section and record it to track the production capabilities of the individual alpaca. This task can be deferred to a later, more convenient time.

I use clear plastic bags and label each bag with the name of the alpaca and the section. I put neck, leg and, if possible, the apron bag together with the blanket to end up with one bag per animal.

Since we shear our own animals we move along at a pace that allows me to quickly skirt the different sections before bagging. This is hardly possible when shearing has been scheduled with a hired shearer or lots of animals need to be shorn, unless you have helpers who are skillful in skirting. However, if sections are separated as above and blanket fleece is rolled with inserted paper, the skirting and sorting for processing can be done at a later time. When I work with the fleeces I clean the sorting tables thoroughly between colour changes to eliminate colour contamination. This practice needs to be employed for the shearing process for the same reason.

When I prepare fleeces for processing I start with the blanket. Blanket or saddle is the prime fleece area of the alpaca. It is usually finer in micron, preferably uniform in micron, length and colour, with no guard hair, or as few as possible. All these attributes are influenced by genetics and the environment. Your breeding decisions and herd management are crucial to obtain these desirable fibre characteristics.

The fleece is placed on the sorting table with cut side down so that you look at the fleece as it was on the animal. I place both halves of the blanket fleece to join again at the midline. I do a quick tenderness check by picking a pencil size sample. Holding each end between thumb and finger and not twisting I give it a gentle tug, not a jerking tug. While maintaining the pressure I flick the staple middle with another finger. If there is breakage then the fleece is tender. To be sure I test with one or two more samples from different areas. Tender fleece is not fit for the rigors of commercial spinning. It might however, be suitable for felt making. Should you encounter a tender fleece set it aside, make note of it and check out the animal. Fleece tenderness is caused by

stress during the growth period. This could have been caused by sickness, nutritional changes or weaning etc. Once the fleece has been assessed for soundness I proceed with skirting.

What is Skirting?

Skirting is removing anything that could have a negative impact on processing and the end product.

Excessive vegetable matter (VM), fecal and urine stains, hairy sections (lots of guard hair) like armpits, second cuts and other objects (like twine), affect processing. These need to be removed to ensure a clean fleece and to make processing as cost effective as possible.

I do a crunch test by squeezing the part of the fleece that shows a lot of VM; if it crunches, it is too contaminated with VM and needs to be removed. Unfortunately, cria fleeces act like Velcro and are often the most VM contaminated fleeces. Second cuts can be avoided with best-use shearing practice. If you do find some, remove them because they create noils in the yarn. By shaking the fleece these nasty, offending pieces will fall through the one inch wire mesh. This also reduces the dust and sand content. After thorough skirting I move on to sorting.

What is Sorting?

Sorting is separating fleece sections by their attributes thus adding value to the fleece and quality to the end product. To this end all fleece sections need to be sorted for uniformity in micron, length and colour and the absence or presence of guard hair.

I feel the entire fleece for fineness and separate sections that do not feel the same. I pull a lock from somewhere in the middle and use this as a guide for length and fineness. The length should not vary more than two inches. If the variation is greater, I separate it from the rest. The Canadian Fibre Co-op accepts short fibre (1.5”-3.5”) to be processed in the woolen method and long fibre (3.5”-6”) for the worsted method. Sorting by colour is necessary to obtain uniform coloured fleece batches. This is particularly necessary if you decide to send your fleeces to the Co-op. Coloured spots should be removed and



Separated for dehairing

put with likewise coloured parts.

Last but not least, it is important to separate sections that show a fair amount of guard hair. Guard hair is a stiff, hollow fibre that does not spin well and does not take well to dyeing. Guard hair will downgrade an otherwise fine microned fleece. Some custom mills have machines to dehair fibre. If fineness is evident, processing these parts is worthwhile because a satisfactory yarn can be made from it. Keep these sorted sections in a separate bag and label them for dehairing.

Attention should be given to the neck fleeces. Neck fibre can be as fine as the blanket but is usually shorter and therefore needs to be separated.

After skirting and sorting I weigh and record the amount of usable fibre from each animal. I then grade the fleece into micron bands, which allow for a three micron spread, and record this as well. These production records form an essential part of our breeding decisions.

In Canada fibre is classed into six grades:

- Grade 1 <20 micron, Ultrafine
- Grade 2 20-22.9, Superfine
- Grade 3 23-25.9, Fine
- Grade 4 26-28.9, Medium
- Grade 5 29-32, Intermediate
- Grade 6 32.1-35, Robust.

When all fleeces are skirted and sorted and weight and grades have been recorded, I combine fleeces like to like-fleece of same grade, length and colour-to create large fleece batches for processing. This can be done if you feel confident and have experience. If not, leave fleeces bagged separately.

Why is it Necessary to Skirt and Sort?

Thoroughly skirted and properly sorted fleeces deliver clean and uniform lines of fibre for cost efficient processing. It adds value to the fleece and ensures consistency in quality for processing, which carries forward to the end product.

To ensure longevity for the alpaca industry the growth of the fibre industry must progress simultaneously. Processors need quality fibre in order to produce consistent quality end products for sale to their customers. No matter what our reasons for raising alpacas, and I am sure there are many, in the end we are all fibre producers. It is in the best interest of alpaca breeders/ producers to learn to skillfully skirt and sort their fleece harvest at farm level. This allows us to maximize the net financial return on our yearly fibre crop. By delivering clean, quality fleeces for processing in as large batches as possible we are able to minimize costs and ensure product consistency. This breeder/producer participation will propel the fibre industry to the next level.

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About the Author

Caecilia has six years experience preparing the fibre produced at Scorry Breck Alpaca farm for processing as well as retailing end products at a local market. In March 2006 she successfully completed the Natural Fibre Centre Camelid Fibre Sorter Certification Program, Alberta and is in the process of becoming a Certified Sorter.

This experience, together with the in-depth knowledge gained through the Camelid Fibre Sorter Certification Course, motivated her to offer fibre harvest consultation in a workshop format called “ABC’s of Fibre Harvest.”