The Alpaca Blanket Project and Pendleton: Bringing Value to Alpaca Fiber

By Carol Lundberg

When we started the Alpaca Blanket Project in 2005, our goal was to provide a renewable commercial resource for alpaca owners' fleece - something other than the cottage industries of spinners and weavers making socks, yarn, and felting. This objective led us into more than just the commercial business of fiber production. It took us into the hearts and homes of fellow members, and into a political controversy of the show world versus fiber world, of alpaca owners looking to initiate the Peruvian ideal, using American ingenuity.

When we acquired our first alpaca, our goal was much simpler: Find a livestock we could run on our five-acre farm to keep down the forage, without tearing up the hillside pastures. The alpaca, with their soft, padded feet and their browser/grazer natures, were exactly what we were looking for. But our fascination for these animals took us well beyond pasture management. We began importing alpaca garments from Peru and Ecuador, through our missionary friends, to sell in our farm store. Soon Elderberry Creek Alpacas was one of the largest import wholesale businesses in the Pacific Northwest, providing chic alpaca fiber products to other farm stores throughout the United States, as well as the general public, online and at trade shows in Oregon and Washington. In dealing with the public, however, one common question kept coming up: "Do you have anything made in the United States?" That question was the driving force of our home-based business, the Alpaca Blanket Project.

We decided to do things somewhat differently. For instance, there is no membership fee to join the ABP. We wanted to provide a resource for alpaca owners to be able to send in fiber and be paid. Members may also purchase end products at wholesale.

Starting with a dream and about 140 loyal members who saw the same vision, the ABP collected about 10,000 pounds of fiber the first year. We flew to Alberta and took Ruth Elvestad's fiber sorting certification class at Olds College. Then fate put us and one of Pendleton's wool buyers together and soon we were sitting at a conference table with Pendleton's Vice-president, Charlie Bishop, talking about making 100% alpaca blankets, something Pendleton had never

Pendelton's Vice-president, Charlie Bishop, explains the quality control process to Peter

attempted before. After five months of testing they determined it was possible and the first blankets were run from grade four fiber collected from all over the United States. When the blankets didn't turn out as expected, we again met with the production management at Pendleton, to work out the problems and began anew. In 2008-09 almost 200 more members were added and 15,000 pounds of fiber were collected. The second run of blankets in grade two fiber was a success and the commercial production of 100% alpaca fiber in the United States had begun.

Since the initial concept in 2006, the business has grown to include:

- a membership of over 350 farms, regional collection sites, to transport members' fiber, in more than a half dozen states,
- payment for members' fiber,
- and, the hiring of the first employee.

We also go on the road and collect fiber in Washington, Oregon, and northern California and at the local alpaca shows. During the summer we also teach sorting classes at our farm.

Maintaining full-time jobs, looking after the ABP, and our five-acre farm, with the alpacas, chickens, two Cocker Spaniels and two cats, keeps us pretty busy, especially since our four children have grown and moved away. Sometimes I think they moved away so we couldn't call them home to help. But they have their own lives and have moved away to pursue their own dreams. We're very proud of our kids.

We were both raised on farms and grew up doing chores. When the opportunity arose to buy this place, we couldn't pass it up. We love it here! That makes taking care of it more fun than work. I didn't move far from my roots; the house in which we operate the ABP was my childhood home. Besides the ABP, Peter works as senior policy and budget analyst for the state of Oregon and I am a medical transcriptionist for the local hospital.

Although things have fallen into place for the ABP, we still foresee a few challenges; from building during a struggling economy and proving to a doubting alpaca community that we are legitimate, to educating growers on getting the most value from their fleece.

We've received emails from a few people who had an unpleasant experience with another fiber outfit that promised to pay for fiber. That experience reflects on us and means we have to work harder to get past those feelings of doubt. There is also increasing competition in the alpaca fiber community and a perception that there aren't enough animals to go around. According to registration records, there are almost 200,000 alpacas in the United States, and that doesn't include the unregistered fiber animals. Even by conservative estimates, that's over a million pounds of fiber in the US alone.

Alpaca in the US has been the child prodigy to an industry seeking the "green" advantage. From its efficient physiology to its production of a grease-free, hypoallergenic fleece, in an array of pleasing colors, the alpaca is showing itself to be the eco-friendly animal of the future.This fact has not been lost on prognosticators in the wool industry in the United States, a country running behind Australia and Peru in alpaca fiber production. Conversely, the rising interest in fiber has caused some aggravation from shearers and the growers of show animals. For the past twenty years growers have had their animals sheared for the show ring. A shearer, having to be concerned only with how the animal looked in the end, could shear many animals per hour, making a pleasing profit at the end of a day.

Alternatively, having to pay more attention to how they shear - reducing second cuts and providing the most fleece with the least amount of waste - slows shearers down, leading to a reduction in their past cash cow. Alternatively, owners are concerned that an increase in the fiber industry and recognition of the alpaca as a "fiber" animal will cause the value of their show animals to dwindle. We do not believe that to be a legitimate concern. In other livestock industries there are show animals and there are work animals. The fact that there are animals that are shorn, slaughtered, worked or used for things other than show, hasn't affected the

Doing a Quick Skirt & Sort

Collecting Fiber on the Washington State Run

The spinners at Pendleton Woolen Mills

Quality control workers at Pendleton's Washougal Mill.

value of their show counterparts.

While the critics rage on, we, and the rest of the ABP members, are pleased with the outcome of the past two years and look forward to the growing prospects. We just renegotiated with Pendleton and are looking forward to our future relationship with them. They are so pleased with the product, that they will now be putting the "Pendleton Woolen Mills" label on each unit, rather than the "Westland Woven by Pendleton" label.

They have put an enormous amount of time and effort into getting a top-end 100% alpaca product and have succeeded very well. We've already achieved the first two goals of our business plan. As long as we continue to move forward and provide benefit to our members, we'll keep working at it.

I enjoy managing the office side of the business, but I don't care for the politics. Sometimes it can be very discouraging. One member told me that there will always be someone who would have complained about their seat on the lifeboat of the Titanic! When I get discouraged I remember that, take a deep breath, and move on to the next task.

We have been approached by folks who think that we, as a business, are working to undermine AFCNA. That couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, we are well acquainted with Larry Vellozzi, current president of AFCNA, and are confident that if anyone can, he will be the one to put them back on solid ground. We think there is plenty of room in this industry for all the businesses that are trying to provide a resource for the alpaca grower.

Alpaca owners working with other alpaca owners to share the benefits of alpaca: Wasn't that what we all started out to do in the first place?

CQ

About the Author

Carol Lundberg and her husband, Peter, own and operate the Alpaca Blanket Project in Stayton, Oregon. She also works as a medical transcriptionist at Santiam Hospital. The couple have four children and four grandchildren and enjoy any free time riding their Harleys with their Cocker Spaniels, Roxie and Maggie, but most time can be found working on the Project or on their five-acre farm. You can contact Carol at:
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Alpaca Blanket Facts

The following can now be considered as scientifically proven "facts" as confirmed through testing done by Gaston Fiber College on the 100% American, 100% alpaca blankets manufactured by Pendleton Woolen Mills for the Alpaca Blanket Project.

Some of these "facts" may be more specific to the ABP blankets as a result of the production and design, rather than specific to alpaca in general.

FACT: The Alpaca Blanket was tested for pilling. Light pilling was observed after thirty minutes of constant abrasion. No further pilling occurred after that. The pilling results are comparable to what acrylic and other synthetic fibers can only achieve by the treatment of chemicals. The alpaca blanket is 100% natural fiber, and should last for years without excessive pilling under proper care methods.

FACT: Abrasion tests were done on the Alpaca Blanket to determine longevity of use. The blanket showed no discernable wear up to 15,000 cycles. This is comparable to standards for light upholstery use, which means your blanket could last for years and years of constant use of lolling about and snuggling.

FACT: The Alpaca Blanket was tested for its ability to resist water absorbency. The blanket did not wick after ten minutes, nor absorb liquids using the drop test. This means that, should you spill something on your blanket, just dab it off. The natural water resistance of 100% alpaca, without chemical treatment.