

Educate alpaca producers on the benefits of grading and sorting fleeces to improve usability and return on investment.

Final Report for FNC08-707

Project Type: Farmer/Rancher

Funds awarded in 2008: \$5,996.50

Projected End Date: 12/31/2010

Region: North Central

State: Missouri

Project Coordinator:

[April Gibson](#)

Project Information

Summary:

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Missouri Skies Alpaca Ranch is located on a 230 acre farm in Osage County, Missouri. Approximately 200 acres are leased to a black angus raiser and the remaining 30 acres houses the home, alpaca barn and pastures for 28 alpacas.

We have been raising alpacas for 10 years, and just prior to the commencement of this grant, April Gibson attended Olds College, Alberta, CA for certification as an alpaca fiber classer and grader.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Goals: By educating and providing alpaca producers with the ability to get the maximum dollar for their fiber yield, the industry as a whole will grow. This will result in better quality end products, thus creating demand. The impact of this project will be the increase of the usable fleece by appropriate grading.

Each producer that utilizes the grading and sorting information provided through the education and service project and applies it to their overall fleece processing should see a 10 to 30 percent fleece utilization increase depending on the products they choose to produce. This will increase their ability to maximize profitability of the fleece that normally would have been wasted. Increased profitability improves the viability of the American alpaca fiber market and sustains the community of farms and ranches.

PROCESS

The best way to educate alpaca fiber producers on the benefits of fiber sorting and grading is to demonstrate it to them using their own fiber and then explaining the details of the results. In order to engage alpaca producers, several announcements and notices were distributed soliciting volunteers to receive free sorting services. The grant activities were discussed in articles submitted to the MOPACA newsletter and journals. Demonstrations were performed at annual regional alpaca shows. Fourteen alpaca producers participated resulting in the grading of 410 alpaca fleeces. In some cases the grading took place at the producers' location, in most

cases, the fiber was picked up from the producer, graded and returned with detailed reports on the outcome of the grading. Each producer was provided with individual counseling on the grading results, recommendations of how to make the best use of the fiber, and suggestions on future products. All recipients of the grant-funded grading appeared to gain insight on the benefits of grading and asked numerous questions both at the time of receiving grading results and after the engagement.

PEOPLE

Liz Mitchko of Whirlwind Ranch and Kristina Flegel of Dos Donas Alpacas hosted demonstrations of fiber grading at their ranches utilizing their own fiber being graded. They also distributed flyers on fiber grading and the grant availability. Mid-America Alpaca Show and MOPACA Invitational Alpaca Show provided space for demonstrations to alpaca producers and the public at their annual alpaca shows. The Alpaca Fiber Symposium (TAFS) which took place at Gaston, NC and Richmond, VA both included April Gibson discussing the grant and benefits of fiber grading. At Richmond, VA, April Gibson provided a formal presentation on fiber grading.

RESULTS

A total of 410 fleeces were graded for fourteen alpaca producers. Alpaca grading demonstrations were performed at four locations on six occasions. Three demonstrations were performed at ranches and approximately 80 alpaca raisers observed. Three demonstrations were performed at annual alpaca shows with approximately 110 alpaca raisers observing.

Although each recipient of grading services as part of the grant was provided a survey to complete, getting completed surveys was very difficult. Received surveys indicate that the respondents all gained significant knowledge from the process. Anecdotally, all participants indicate that the knowledge gained from the grant will affect future decisions on products to be made from their alpaca fiber and a greater range of products and higher quality products are expected to result. For one participant, the graded fiber was processed into socks and yarn. When compared with similar products from the same mill, but using ungraded fiber, significant differences in the softness and shedding of the products could be noted by the producer.

One surprising insight gained, was that producers often don't know what to do with their fiber and want an expert to recommend a mill and decide for them what products should be made.

As a result of the education received from this grant at least one producer has chosen to process ½ ton of alpaca fiber which has been graded in order to produce the best quality products. However, a number of other producers have suspended fiber processing due to the economic pressures of the recession. Industry-wide this is not uncommon and annual breeding programs have been suspended to reduce costs. This is unfortunate as fiber grading can be a low cost product improvement process which can significantly increase return on investment. The conflict arises because alpaca producers have very little profit margin and any reduction in sales can make improvement programs impossible.

DISCUSSION

The experience gained through this grant and the opportunity to visit with so many alpaca producers has reaffirmed the information learned from fiber grading certification and personal experience. Grading alpaca fiber and sorting it into uniform length and class significantly improves the products made from the fiber. Products made from graded fiber exhibit superior softness and wear ability regardless of the grade of the fiber used. Missouri Skies Alpaca Ranch will continue to employ fiber grading as a significant part of our business model.

Using some example numbers, if each fiber producing alpaca has a 48 ounces

blanket and 48 ounces of neck, leg and belly fiber, historically only the blanket has been processed. The blanket portion itself would have about a 10 to 20 percent loss from dirt and debris during grading. When the full fleece, all 96 ounces, is graded an additional 60 percent increase of usable fiber is seen. This takes into account the greater loss from dirt and debris on the neck, leg, and belly fiber. The resulting usable fiber from a 96 ounce full fleece moves from 40.8 ounces of blanket-only fiber to 69.6 ounces of fiber from the whole fleece.

OUTREACH

Our project was to educate alpaca producers on the benefits of grading fiber to obtain a quality product that would increase the likely hood of return business, creating a durable product with consistent quality and in some types of products giving an heirloom quality, We communicated these benefits at annual Alpaca shows, farm demonstrations and industry trade conferences. At the MOPACA Invitational Show and the Mid-America Alpaca Show we were provided demonstration space where a live demonstration was performed for producers and the general public. Viewers were encouraged to ask questions touch the fiber and handle samples of finished products, Approximately 110 visitors from both events were given brochures and cards describing the benefits of grading Alpaca fiber. At The Alpaca Fiber Symposium (TAFS) in Gaston, NC April Gibson participated in industry discussions promoting the benefits of fiber grading with nearly 300 producers. At The Alpaca Fiber Symposium in Richmond, VA April Gibson was a guest speaker where she discussed fiber grading and the SARE grant process. She answered questions and demonstrated product differences to a group of more than 80 producers. These producers were provided with detail information regarding the fiber grading process, the benefits and provided with handouts and discussion time to ask detailed questions.

Research

Participation Summary

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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