ALPACA INDUSTRY INITIATIVES

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With a less than twenty year history, the Australian alpaca industry must stand as a role model for other emerging Australian agricultural enterprises, all competing for the attention of primary producers, investment dollars, and government assistance. That reputation is based on several strategic initiatives that have brought the industry to the position of strength in which it finds itself today.

The first was the establishment in 1992, by just a handful of alpaca owners, of the Australian Alpaca Association (AAA). Beginning with barely more alpacas than breeders, the AAA today has over 2300 financial members, spread through every state of Australia. The nation now boasts over 60,000 registered alpacas, the biggest national herd outside South America, and Australian alpacas have been exported to New Zealand, Canada, USA, Britain, China and Germany.

Shortly following the establishment of the AAA, the industry body set up the International Alpaca Registry (IAR), an Australian-based registry designed to record the pedigrees of all alpacas born of its foundation stock. The IAR is one of the foundation stones of the Australian alpaca industry, and its early establishment was an important and insightful initiative of the foundation members of the AAA.

The third initiative taken in the first decade of the Australian alpaca industry was the establishment of a national fibre cooperative, an organization designed to receive and on-sell the Australian alpaca clip. Today, as an unlisted public company, Australian Alpaca Fleece Limited (AAFL), it collects, classes, processes and markets Australian alpaca fleece, and through its several strategic industry partners, sees Australian fleece made into Australian product, and sold on through Australian retail outlets. It is presently negotiating overseas markets and partners, and its success underpins the long term viability and commercial success of the alpaca industry.

Now into its second decade, a further two important initiatives have been undertaken by the Australian alpaca industry, conceived and promoted by the leadership of the AAA on behalf of its members.

The first was the annual **Fleece Data Project**, now in its fourth year, which was designed as an annual census of the Australian alpaca clip, to characterize that clip by criteria of fineness, evenness, and colour. Members were invited to submit their own fleece testing results for inclusion in the survey, or could submit midside fleece samples to the AAA for testing at no expense to the grower. The results to date demonstrate an annual improvement in commercial fleece traits, and provide important data for projections that are of great commercial significance to growers and processors alike.

The second was a national program to accelerate genetic improvement in those characteristics considered by breeders to be of commercial significance. The membership was widely canvassed by the AAA before a model was chosen. That model is the **Across-herd Genetic Evaluation (AGE) program,** which defines a range of traits considered by breeders to be of commercial importance, and then measures those traits in maturing alpacas. By linking those measurements to the database of the IAR, predictive values can be obtained for each trait in each alpaca, reflecting the ability of those alpacas to pass on those desirable traits to their offspring. Breeders can then predict the likely outcome of joining any two alpacas, and make better mating decisions that will accelerate their progress towards any chosen breeding objective (such as heavier fleece weights or finer fleeces). The results of the first year of data collection, due in early 2005, will benchmark the Australian alpaca industry, and will provide data by which breeders may compare their alpacas against national averages, and over future years assess their rate of genetic improvement against the industry average.

As well as producing better alpacas which produce more valuable fleece, the AGE may have other important consequences. By the application of scientific method, Australian alpacas should make faster genetic progress than their foreign competitors. Australian alpacas may then come to benchmark the international standard for alpacas. Overseas breeders may wish to compare their own progress with that of the Australian industry, and may seek to enroll their alpacas on the AGE. To do so, their alpacas will need to be registered on the IAR, which will improve both the international standing, and the value to the Australian industry, of the IAR. Conceivably, the IAR could become the dominant registry for alpacas internationally, and the Australian bred alpaca the international benchmark.

All Australian breeders will benefit from these initiatives, which deserve their strong commitment. In the 21st century, as at the beginning of the 20th century, Australia may find itself once more riding on the back of a fleece developed overseas, but refined in Australia. But this time it will be Australian Alpaca, and not Australian Merino, providing the ride.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE AAA

- Ownership of AAA offices and building
- International Alpaca Registry
- Across-herd Genetic Evaluation program
- Alpacas Australia magazine
- AAA Newsletter
- AAA web site
- Online registration
- Australian Alpaca Fibre Limited
- Strategic industry partnerships
- Strategic cooperation with NZAA
- Annual National Show and Sale
- ACIL Alpaca Industry Viability report (2001)
- Strategic Development Task Force Vision 2020 report (2003)
- Annual Fleece Sampling Survey
- Appointment of National Marketing consultants
- Draft certificate course in Agriculture (Alpaca Management)
- National guidelines for showing and judging of alpacas