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JUST A THOUGHT

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It would now seem inevitable that the IAR is to be reopened to imported alpacas. It requires little foresight to predict that Australia will see significant importations over the next twelve months, including large flock importations from South America as well as individual animals from North America.

Most Australian owners and breeders will now be concentrating their attention on the question of screening standards, and where they should be set to achieve the greatest benefit for existing breeders and for the industry as a whole.

Consider for a minute the consequences of setting standards for fleece and conformation inappropriately high, whatever the specific criteria. The number of alpacas which exceeds the standard will be very small, and they will be inordinately expensive and accessible to only a few. The “plantel” quality animals imported will attract high stud fees to justify their cost, and the genetics will consequently be beyond all but a few. The impact on overall Australian herd quality will be as limited as their accessibility. The effect on breeders will be that existing alpacas, of whatever quality, will not carry the official AAA *imprimatur* of having been screened, and will therefore be devalued in the market place. The AAA will receive very limited benefit in terms of import fees and registration fees because of the small numbers being imported. Meanwhile, the debate will continue to rage over what constitutes an appropriate screening standard, as potential importers find that their selected male and female alpacas fail to meet the AAA screening standards, despite having met the personal expectations of the importers. Eventually, breeders will threaten to import their selections irrespective of AAA screening standards, and the AAA will then conduct a referendum that will ultimately drop the screening requirement (sound familiar?), allowing all imports to be registered on the IAR.

Nett result: a free market, but delayed long enough to artificially support the importation of a few “screened” herds at high prices, and devaluing the existing Australian herd.

Now consider the alternative: **no screening** (gasp!). Every animal imported now has to face the market on its merits (pedigree, conformation, fleece), without the implied certificate of quality conferred by AAA-designated screening. **All** alpacas will be eligible for registration, irrespective of their origin, parentage, fleece or conformation.

The AAA can still levy importation and registration fees, and as the numbers are likely to be greater, the value to the AAA is likely to be higher. The AAA can publish, if it wishes to do so, a **recommendation** for screening, against which the buyer can compare the alpaca before purchase, but *it is now the buyer, and not the AAA, that bears the burden and the responsibility of screening*. Where breeders value an alpaca that falls outside those guidelines, they may buy, import and register that animal without penalty, but carry the financial responsibility for their decision. The AAA need no longer cop the flak for imposing screening standards that do not meet an individual breeder's expectations, and importers (and ultimately, purchasers) need no longer pay screeners large amounts of money to underwrite a screening program that is not universally accepted.

Importers, meanwhile, will have to be even more careful in their selection of alpacas overseas, knowing that animals can no longer be imported with an implied guarantee of quality, and that every imported animal will face those **endorsed but not enforced standards** on entry into the Australian marketplace. Existing alpacas in the Australian marketplace will not be immediately devalued by the emergence of a "screened" class of alpaca, and may even be seen as superior to imported animals if importers fail to meet the recommended standard of quality.

I would further suggest that registration on the IAR be conditional upon veterinarian inspection of the animal, undertaken in Australia by any qualified vet, certifying the subject alpaca to be free of "disqualifying defects", namely, those anatomical features of phenotype that are considered to be genetic faults, as defined by the AAA for show purposes. (It is perhaps worth considering, as a separate matter, that the same opportunity be given electively to Australian-borne cria, and that the registration certificate be amended to allow annotation indicating those alpacas whose registration has been accompanied by a vet certificate deeming them to be free of disqualifying defects.)

The IAR also stands to be a winner, as it will potentially embrace larger numbers of alpaca than any other register, together with their pedigree. That pedigree will ultimately be the guarantee of quality, as animals with unknown parentage or parents of lesser quality will be immediately apparent on inspection of the family tree. This more comprehensive pedigree will become the basis of selection by genotype, in much the same way as screening standards attempt to underwrite selection by phenotype. In short, in purchasing any Australian alpaca, the purchaser will have an animal to inspect, recommended screening standards which he may apply to that animal, and a pedigree that may certify the absence of disqualifying defects: on this basis, the market will determine its own price for every animal.

So my recommendation to the AAA is that we don't spend vast amounts of time and energy in trying to make water seek any other than its own level. Rather, we open the marketplace and the IAR to all imported alpacas, barring those with genetic faults, and we spend our hard-earned AAA money educating the buyers to use the IAR and the recommended screening standards in making their selections and in negotiating their cost.

Just a thought . . .