

## RUGGING.....Perceptions Of.....

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At Illawarra Alpacas we have been *RUGGING* alpacas for the past 4 years. With a herd now numbering around 300, and being the only large herd involved in rugging (that we are aware of), we were invited by the Handbook editor to document our perceptions of this *RUGGING* based on that experience.

Initially, we had been excited by the newspaper articles reporting colossal prices for "rugged" sheep's wool, and, like all Alpaca Breeders, witnessing the almost daily routine of the dust bath on that gorgeous, soft, fine and fabulous fibre, we decided that, with our numbers, we were in an excellent position to *experiment with rugs*. The driving force behind this was the wish to see if we could produce a *BETTER* product, and thereby enhance the value of this product in dollar terms as a return to all breeders.

After considering several options, we decided on the well-advertised "SHEEP COVERS". We were influenced by their marketing blurb which explains their unique design. This was a combined CSIRO and TAFE project seeking to develop a suitable paddock cover for sheep with the singular job of protecting the fleece. These *covers* come in 6 different sizes, and, although designed for sheep, we realized that with small-unsecured adjustments, they did a wonderful job on alpacas. The *cover* virtually wraps the fleece. It has elastic at the neck, elastic at the tail, and elastic along the bottom sides, which seals the fleece from unwanted dirt, dust, gravel, burrs, and other vegetation. Over the years, the supplier/manufacturer has used several different materials for various reasons, but we have found the heavier and stiffer nylon non-rip fabric by far the best; especially in a paddock situation where many hidden snags lie in wait.

As with most cutting edge research, our observations over these four years can be divided into the PROS and the CONS.

- THE CONS start with the cost involved. In both outlay for rugs, and in the staff hours spent rugging, monitoring, changing, mending etc, this cost is not inconsiderable. We have always kept in mind the prospect, and hope, of MEGA dollars to be made in the end that could justify this. And if we are right, then the reward will be there. Relative to hours, I find that the more we do it, the better we do it. Initial outlay involves not only current, but future rugs, until, *Jack's will do for Fred, when Jack moves into Bill's*. The Rugs now cost between \$5.75 and \$7.50 each when bought in numbers greater than 100! The nylons rugs seem to have a very long life span when mended, some rugs have been used now for up to 4 years. That is good value.
- They keep out the vast majority of the dirt, but a small amount of dust can be evident at times.
- Rugs will not create super alpacas for you, but they will, I believe, allow them to reach and display their full fibre potential.

- They prevent tipping as a direct result of protection from the sun, wind, rain and dirt. This can hinder good staple definition from the showing point of view.
- There is a need to monitor the rugged alpacas, as with rugged animals in general. They and their fleeces grow, they play, they get themselves into difficult situations that need sorting out. But then this is just normal livestock management.
- One other CON is that fleece weights are down because the sand and dirt content is down!!

*THE PROS* leap out when one peels back the rug on a fleece that has not seen daylight for 6 months, nor dirt, sticks, burrs or muddy water, and then the experience is fulfilling.

- It is as if the fibre is as God intended it to be.; before of course he invented rolling and loose soil.
- It is clean, soft, sometimes with a slightly oily feel, with well-aligned fibres, bent if long, but never matted or tangled.
- It feels luxuriant.
- The fibres appear longer than their neighbouring fibres.
- The fibres have no tender tip, and there appears no wastage in the actual fibre.
- One's hand come away clean, instead of dry with a dusty feeling.
- There is no tipping.
- There is no UV damage.
- Our shearer prefers the rugged fleece, as he shears more alpacas on the same set of blades.
- The dermatophilus infection on legs due to excessively wet and humid conditions, has never ventured up under the rugged areas.
- This suggests that they are not hot and stifling, and they obviously do not hinder the flow of air around the body.
- Perhaps they are even cooler.
- They do not prevent the adventurous alpaca from cooling off in the dams or creeks.
- They do not seem to upset matings (although we no longer rug our mature females).
- There is now no need to worry about dirty paddocks or broad acre traditional sheep country.
- And there is one other tremendous advantage. The protection of the freshly shorn alpacas from the scourges of wind, rain and sun. That means we can sleep at night knowing there is a weather change coming.

The experiment is by no means complete, as the proof of the pudding will only be in the eating. That is, when the manufacturers consume our product. We have yet to decide whether or not it has all been worthwhile.

After sending samples of rugged fleece to our alpaca co-operative for their evaluation, I recently spoke with their representatives. They were excited by the prospect of such gorgeous fleece, but the final point made was that until there is sufficient quantity, or at least 100 kilos, of like colour, like micron, and like length, then the manufacturers could not even commence to make up their minds as to whether or not it is **BETTER**, and therefore more valuable. Illawarra Alpacas does not have enough rugged fibre sitting in the shed to

fulfill this requirement at this stage, but we are working on it. We have been encouraged to continue with our experiment, and possibly rug the cria.

At this stage, I'm afraid all we can offer other alpaca growers is the promise to keep them updated with any new findings, and a decision as to whether or not they should commence preparing their own *pudding*.