

Alpacas – from a Hobby to a Business

The Beginning

Brooke and Sue Richards first got interested in Alpacas when reading about the first importation from Chile in the late 1980's. NZ's trade agreement with Chile had allowed the New Zealand to be the first to import alpacas.

These animals sounded perfect for the small farm, being relatively trouble free. No fly strike, no foot rot, no dagging, no crutching. Need no special fencing and run about 5 to the acre.

The Purchase

It was not until 1998 that after much investigation and discussion that Brooke gave Sue the OK to "go ahead and get a couple of those alpacas you want". The first thought was to get two females mainly for pets and slowly build up a herd.

After a bit more investigation it was discovered that the Agresearch station was selling off some stock. These alpacas although old were also very cheap. So instead of 2 females the first purchase was of 15 females, all pregnant.

In at the Deep End

The first load turned up and even though they had travelled all the way from Invermay in Otago to Houhora in the Far North the alpacas just strolled out and started eating grass. The first cria was born just 5 days after their arrival and from then on each was a wonderful surprise.. It had been estimated that they might get one more cria (baby) out of each old girl but in fact they have had 3 or 4 from most of them.

The Business

With an increasing herd size it was fast approaching the time to start selling some alpacas. After placing a few ads in the newspaper and getting lots of replies things looked good. But it soon became obvious that people were not going to travel 5 hours north of Auckland to look at alpacas. It was time to move closer to the market.

With the move to Rotorua also came the realisation that Alpacas was now more than just a hobby this was serious it was going to be the sole means of income.

Improving Quality

Since purchasing the original herd of Chilean alpacas others in the industry had been busy importing Peruvian animals from Australia and direct from Peru. It was increasingly obvious that although the Chilean animals were in some cases very fine they did not have the density of fleece that was present in the Peruvians.

A decision had to be made. Stay with the Huacaya (fluffy alpacas) and buy a high quality Peruvian male to improve the density of the original Chilean stock or take the big risk and cross all the animals over to Suri.

It was decided to go the suri way. The reasons for this were that there was some evidence in Australia that this was the fastest way to improve quality. Also in the long term suri looked to have the higher quality fleece. In Peru Suri fleece fetched 2 to 3 times more than the Huacaya fleece and is in high demand from the top end markets in Italy and Japan.

The first step was to buy a Suri stud male and some Suri females. These were imported from Australia as New Zealand had very few Suris available for sale. The first stock were all coloured as the base Chilean stock were mainly coloured.

The fleece quality issue was becoming more and more apparent. The decision to go into coloured suri was revisited. Where was the business headed? A commercial herd was going to have to be White. Colours were good for the small market of hand spinners but commercial processors want white.

Travelling to Australia to find some quality white suri added an instant quality injection to the herd. The trip to Australia confirmed the decision to improve. Prices in Australia have held for the quality animals but those breeders who had not made efforts to improve their stock were not so happy.

Breeders in NZ now have the opportunity to improve the quality of their alpacas with top quality males recently imported from Peru , services of which are now available on your farm. Buying stud services from the best males available was a major decision to hasten improvement, this was considered the most important business decision since buying the alpacas.