

## **Maximise your fleece return - by maintaining high value fleece traits**

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Happy with your return on your cria fleeces, but disappointed that the value of your four year old fleeces may not cover the cost of shearing?

This is a familiar scenario that many studs across Australia experience each year when they send off their fleece to one of the fleece buying groups, only to have the value of these older fleeces be significantly below that of the animals first or second fleece.

There are several factors that determine the price that a buyer will ultimately pay for your fleece, and these are the factors you need to concentrate on if you want to increase your fleece value.

Many positive factors are often in abundance in a cria fleece or first fleece, such as low micron, low guard hair, high comfort factor and useable fleece length.

But as our alpacas age they are often prone to blow out in micron, guard hair becomes more prominent, their fleece gets the prickly factor (low CF), and their fleece length reduces, especially in breeding females.

But this doesn't have to be the end of the story.

It is possible to breed alpacas that are genetically predisposed to blow out less, have lower guard hair & produce useable fleece length as they age.

They can do this whilst raising healthy strong cria and maintaining a good body weight.

To start heading your herd in the direction of higher value fleece, you need to know what you are working with, and will need to test your fleeces at roughly the same time each year.

Animals that are consistent year after year are more valuable to you than those that have a history of highly variable fleece tests.

So how do you get a herd that has longevity of valuable fleece traits out of a herd that doesn't currently exhibit the ability to maintain these traits?

It is true that you could limit micron blow out by reducing feed intake, but this can also have a negative effect on fleece length and reproductive capability.

Alpacas who have a lot of variation in micron along the fibre staple, particularly due to inconsistent nutritional intake, may also have tenderness in their fleece which causes it to break in processing and is considered a major fault by processors.

Or you can do the opposite, and do what many will tell you not to do, supplement your alpacas feed, at least for a period of time long enough to see the effects on the fibre micron.

Good nutrition with ample vitamins, minerals and protein will help them rear healthy young, grow good fleece lengths and maintain good body condition to the upper end of their ability.

But be aware that this process will initially create a blow out in micron if an alpaca has previously had a lower micron due to less nutrition, commonly known as environmentally fine.

But this is what you want to know.

If you want to fine up your herd, and are willing to make some hard decisions in this regard, you can use this to your advantage by selling on those alpacas that may have been environmentally fine, in favour of those able to maintain a low fibre micron when well fed, it is a useful tool for finding out who are the 'blow out' prone in your herd.

If despite your best efforts some alpaca in your herd just refuse to blow out significantly, then these are the ones have the 'x' factor as they have higher value fleece traits. With micron being a highly heritable trait, this 'x' factor is more likely to be passed on to the next generation, especially if both parents exhibit this stay fine ability.

If you find none of your herd stays fine after this process, then you will need to use a proven stay fine male over your females that is/was much finer than them at the same age, and start the process that way, rather than sell off the lot and start again!

The resulting progeny should mostly exhibit a reduction in micron on their dams at the same age & hopefully also inherit the ability to stay finer for longer. But like all things in alpacas, it's then a waiting game to see the results of your fleece tests for the next few years.

A very low standard deviation in our experience is a factor that often goes hand in hand with these 'stay fine' alpacas, and it is useful to aim for SD's under 4.0 in young animals and we find that even under 3.0 is becoming more common due to our long term focus on lowering SD in our herd.

Course guard hair that spreads throughout the body especially into the saddle is a negative trait that will increase your overall micron and SD, and lower your comfort factor, but more importantly reduce the price paid for your fibre. Aim for comfort factors in the 90 to 100% range in all age animals.

Guard hair in your herd can be reduced significantly by matching guard hair prone females to appropriate males to reduce the guard hair in their progeny.

Sometimes introducing positive traits for fibre value and reducing negative traits will be a 2 or 3 step process, and you may not achieve it all in one generation.

We use 2 males who between them have in abundance, a combination of the high value fleece traits we seek. They also exhibit other desirable traits such as defined crimp, lustre, good conformation and density, which allows for a 2 step process that mostly produces the type of alpacas we want to breed to have a viable return on our alpaca fleece.

At times you may have to be willing to sacrifice traits to a certain extent that have no influence on fleece value, to fast track your progress in other areas, depending on how big a jump you need to make to achieve higher value fleece.

Aiming for alpacas that maintain a fleece under 20 micron for 5 years, then under 25 micron for the next 5 years will see your returns on your fleece increase substantially.

Couple this with fleece lengths between 75 to 120mm on average, with SD's always under 5.0 even in older animals and reduced guard hair, and over time you will develop a herd of financially viable fibre producers.

You're not going to make a living from fleece returns if you don't run thousands of alpacas, but wouldn't it be nice to at least cover your shearing and husbandry costs each year?

With micron alone being 70% of the factor determining fleece value, it is worthwhile keeping this most valuable of fleece traits at the end of the scale that pays dividends.

Concentrate on breeding animals that have as much fleece weight as you can achieve, whilst still maintaining longevity of high value fleece traits, and before too long this will be your reality.

Within a few years you can turn a low value fleece herd around, if you don't let those factors that are low on the value scale for high fleece return overly dictate your breeding choices.