

Robyn Betts
Jaegar Alpacas, VIC

As soon as an alpaca – suri or huacaya – is restrained on the shearing table or floor, its fleece becomes a commercial commodity. The genetics, breeding, awards and animal's name and temperament are no longer important. The priority at that point is to obtain the highest commercial yield possible from individual and groups of alpacas with the key being 'consistency'. That means aiming to have consistency within a single skirted fleece and within the total fleece clip of your alpaca herd.



With practice it is possible to identify the variations in micron and 'handle' as well as the visual fleece characteristics of lustre and locking.

In order to achieve fleece consistency it is important to understand the various components of each animal's fleece.

Suri alpacas – the focus of this article – have fleeces where there can be difficulty identifying the head and tail of the fleece once it is shorn off the animal. However, this positioning will help to understand the likely occurrence of micron, style and fleece length variations.

A suri fleece can be sorted into three or four class lines each having a separate commercial value and processing purpose. These sections are:

- > **Saddle and back** – usually 90-140mm in length, optimum characteristic style for that animal (locking, lustre, handle and colour) and optimum micron (19-25 micron on average) for that animal.
- > **Neck and upper legs** – usually 70-100mm in length, different style to saddle and back, stronger micron (usually 21-28 micron) with a likelihood of medullated fibre.
- > **Brisket, belly, lower legs and saddle skirtings** – usually 50-90mm in length, minimal if any style, concentrated guard hair and strong to very strong micron.

It is possible that across the saddle and back sections there may be a variation of micron and style which could be classed into A1 and A2 sections. However, each class of fleece from this section has a commercial value but combining the sections will provide a 'best fit' value – often the lesser of the two gradings. It is therefore vital that suri fleece is skirted into these separate sections and each section is as consistent as possible in micron, handle, length and style.

Following this process across a whole herd clip will result in two primary lines of suri fleece according to the fleece prices and gradings stated by AAFL, and this has the potential to then increase the commercial value and quality of your suri fleece clip.

Huacaya fleece is also classified by micron and style, the style including crimp consistency and its relationship to micron. However, the suri fleece doesn't have this obvious visual characteristic so much of the suri skirting process is based around 'feel'. Across the saddle, it is possible to 'feel' marked differences in micron and handle (the silkiness and softness). A suri saddle can also have a variation of medullated fibre (hollow guard hairs) and this can be difficult to identify if the fleece is tightly locked. It is important to recognise that the overall micron and standard deviation of a saddle and 'feel' of a fleece can be influenced by weather, nutrition, animal age, health, and vegetable matter. It is highly probable that a suri alpaca's saddle is a combination of two fleece classes even if the length and lustre appear the same.

The saddle and back will have edge skirtings that can be put into 'the pieces' pile and there also may be medullated sections within the saddle which may need to be included as pieces rather than retained as saddle fleece. This is usually likely for suri-crosses where the fibre is confused between the suri and huacaya styles. It is important to skirt suri-cross fleece for length and 'feel' consistency – pulling out the stronger micron bits of the saddle fleece to go into the pieces line. However, a well skirted suri cross fleece – the saddle and back – of good spinning length (110-120 mm) and

handle, with minimal guard hair and vegetable matter is appreciated by hand spinners. It can be combined with similar fleece types and processed through the many mini-mill businesses as 8 or 12 ply knitting yarn thereby offering breeders a commercially valued product which wouldn't necessarily be achieved through selling to larger alpaca fleece and fibre buyers.

Depending on the age and gender (e.g. breeding females) of the suri, the neck and upper leg fleece may have a very good quality and style but be of shorter length or they may have a style consistent to the skirted pieces – length, minimal style and medium micron. These factors need to determine in which fleece line this fibre will be classified.

Younger males in their first to third fleeces may display moderately styled and uniform length neck fleece and this should not be regarded as pieces. This short length fleece with moderate micron and style can be used as a third line of fleece or can be marketed to spinners or processed as outerwear yarn and blended with other natural fibres. This length of fibre is very good for a knitted processing system.

If these good necks and upper legs are not separated from the brisket (heavily medullated fibre) then they will be classed as pieces and priced accordingly.

For more information about skirting suri fleece contact: robbyn@jaegaralpacas.com.au

Skirting suri fleece is primarily about 'feel' and with practise it is possible to identify the variations in micron and non-visual style (handle) as well as the visual fibre characteristics.

Skirting suri fleece does take practise and persistence and it requires the alpaca breeder and grower to take off that particular hat and put on the textile and fibre hat. That can be difficult, when as breeders we want the best outcome from the genetics we are using and wanting to promote.

The aim of the skirting exercise is consistency – ending up with lines of fleece that are consistent for the commercial market.

This is in contrast to identifying the fleece from specific areas of the animal's body (necks, saddle, brisket) as the fleece lines. Skirting suri fleece as a process of sorting and classing can result in the identification of clear fleece lines and this information can be an extremely useful tool to increase the commercial yield of your fleece clip and to make future breeding decisions. 🐾

⋮ Aim for consistent length, micron and style.



⋮ The neck and upper leg fleece may show very good quality and style but be of a shorter length.



This article was first published in *Alpacas Australia* magazine, Issue 59, Summer 2009 and is reproduced with permission of the author and the Australian Alpaca Association Ltd.