



Classing and baling days for the Rumpelstiltskin Project were a great educational device for suri breeders in New Zealand.

Here are some extracts from an article written by **Hermione Richards** of Surico Alpaca about the first weekends of classing in the North and South Islands of New Zealand in 2012.

THE Rumpelstiltskin project was looking for a tight specification of white suri with an average micron of 22.0μ to 23.9μ , an SD under 5μ , and length 80mm – 140mm. The amount of variation in the fibre has an impact of the handle of the final product so it was important to keep specifications tight. As there was a certain amount of cost and time involved in setting up and executing these weekends for both the organisers and the breeders, it was decided to class and collect all grades of suri fibre with the hope that buyers or other projects might be found for the specifications not required by Rumpelstiltskin. In total 63 classes were available.

The weekends were each split into 4 sessions of half a day, meaning breeders didn't need to attend the whole weekend if they only had a small number of fleeces. Each session started with a short introduction to the fibre attributes we wanted and those we needed to avoid. To illustrate these traits small samples of fibre that exhibited either lustre or chalky fleece, colour contamination, strong primary fibre and uniformity of micron were used to train attendees

RUMPLESTILTSKIN PROJECT

on the good and bad characteristics to look for when classing and skirting.

We would then class and skirt a fleece as a group to start then break off into smaller groups, white on one table and colours on another to minimise contamination. Most fleeces came unskirted, which was understandable since most people had been doing nothing except storing the fleece straight after shearing, however it does take more time and we ended up with four very full on days.

Very quickly we worked out an order of things to check – length, tenderness, suri style/nourishment, colour (contamination), and micron.

GOING TO GREAT LENGTHS

Length is a difficult one for breeders to get their head around, why had we set the maximum length at 140mm? The simple answer is that is what the spinning mills will process, they are already leery enough about processing suri fibre (because it is not sheep wool) so to try and get a much longer length than they usually process is too big a battle at the moment, we know we can do up to 140mm because it was successful in the Surissimo trial. So, sadly many beautiful fleeces went straight to the overlong bag if they exceeded our specification. Remember that fleece length is a management issue – in a commercial fibre production situation birthing and shearing would be timed to produce the optimal fibre length.

Tenderness in the fleece can automatically downgrade it to seconds. If the fleece staple is snapping in half it will mean that the length is under the specification minimum.

Suri style and nourishment was an important attribute when selecting fleeces as the inclusion of a dry chalky fleece, or fleece without the smooth suri fibres would affect the performance of the final product. In order to be able to command the top prices we need to produce fabrics that display the beautiful lustre and handle that makes suri so luxurious and unique.



Categorising the colour correctly and consistently is vital. White must be pure white with no coloured fibres as the dye uptake will be different across different colours and can appear as smudges in the fabric. Although we will probably end up combining the light and mid fawns it is much better to do this just before scouring, then we will know the “recipe” and be more likely to reproduce the same colour, the same goes for creating grey from black and white.

Classifying average micron and uniformity of

micron (SD) is the most difficult part of classing. A midside measurement is a great start, but the fleece still needs to be inspected to assess the micron across the whole fleece. Some animals have excellent uniformity across the fleece and some only have a small area on the upper mid blanket, the rest needs skirting out. Where there was no micron test available we had to make an eyeball assessment, to help us do this we had cards with known micron samples that we could use as a guide. To become proficient at assessing micron you need experience, start looking at as many fleeces as you can and test yourself.

MAKING THE GRADE

The other aspect of micron is how much coarse primary fibre is present. It doesn't matter what the average micron is if it is full of bristles then it must be downgraded to seconds.

We also found fleeces that needed to be downgraded due to shearing and contamination issues. Doing your own shearing might sound like a great idea to save money but we really noticed the difference in fleeces from a professional versus the amateurs. Some fleeces were downgraded for excessive second cuts and shearing blows through the middle of the staple. Shearing shed hygiene was also an issue with fleeces being downgraded as they were too contaminated with coarse fibres from another animal or another colour. If you are serious about producing quality fibre you need to use the experts and plan your shearing well so the best quality and lightest colours are shorn first.

Once we had assessed and classed the fleece we skirted out anything not meeting that classification and placed it in bins separating prime and seconds. We allowed a maximum of 10 mins per fleece to try and keep on time and get through tonnage. The bins were weighed in and recorded against each breeder and class. Breeders could then choose if they combined their fibre into the bales or took it home for their own projects. 🐑



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