

# Central Region Newsletter December 2021

Your Monthly Central Region Newsletter From The Alpaca Association New Zealand



Cria - Ros Scott

With Christmas almost upon us it's often a time of reflection on the year that has gone. To be honest it probably hasn't hasn't been the best year we have had. Hopefully though for most of you shearing is done and dusted and for those of you that breed you are now either waiting on some cria to arrive or you are already enjoying their antics in the paddock.

Within the Central Region Committee there has been a changing of the guard as sadly John Malsher has stood down from his post as President. We would like to take this opportunity to thank John for his passion and enthusiasm and we hope that this continues.

We have some great articles this month, so we hope you enjoy the read. If there are any topics that you would like to see covered don't hesitate to get in touch with us.

Let's hope that 2022 will see us all being able to get together to share our experiences, knowledge and love for alpacas. I wish you all a very safe and happy Christmas.

Ros Scott, Acting AANZ Central Region President rtg.scott71@gmail.com



## By Rachel Norman

Criation - Don't you just love that play on words! The combination of Cria (baby alpaca) with creation (in this case referring to giving birth).

Spring is the time that many plan for their alpacas to be giving birth, but as alpacas are induced ovulators you may have done matings at another time. Either way gestation averages 355 days from date of conception, with a few reaching 380+ days. There are a few ways to determine a pregnancy: spit offs, ultrasound and urine testing. Waiting and seeing can lead to being unprepared if there are issues with the pregnancy so ideally knowing for sure is best. As the pregnancy progresses you may notice in the last 3 months a swelling of the abdomen; in the last month you may notice some cria movements and occasional kicks; and about 2 weeks prior the female develops noticeable udders. Or, you may not see any of this as some dams hide the pregnancy well, even to the experienced eye.

The birthing process (unpacking) has three main stages, (from www.tekorito-alpacas.co.nz)

**Stage 1 :** *The start of contractions.* The female may become restless, hum frequently and usually move away from the herd. She will stop grazing, make frequent visits to the communal midden and may alternate standing and sitting in an effort to become comfortable. The duration of this stage varies considerably but finishes when contractions reach one each two minutes.

**Stage 2.** *Birthing of the cria.* Rupture of the fluid (chorioallantoic) sac starts this phase and is completed by the expulsion of the cria. The process normally lasts between 5 and 30 minutes but may be interrupted by resting periods and can take significantly longer for a dam's first cria, or if she is overweight. Assistance is seldom required, particularly with older females who have unpacked many times. Almost all cria are unpacked head-first, facing downwards, with the majority of dams standing. As contractions increase the head appears, closely followed by one forelimb, the second appearing some minutes later. Strong contractions occur to pass the cria's shoulders and chest. Interestingly, some dams will pause and resume grazing for a period during this stage of labour, with the cria dangling. Time in this position does allow fluid to drain from the cria's lungs however. The remainder of the cria is passed shortly afterwards, with the help of gravity. The dam does not lick the cria once on the ground. The umbilical cord detaches very soon after unpacking.

**Stage 3**. *Expulsion of the placenta*. This normally occurs within 20 minutes of the cria unpacking but can take up to one hour. If it has not passed within 8 hours, veterinary assistance will be needed.

It should be noted that neither the unpacking cria nor the placenta should be pulled to 'assist' their passage. Doing this can cause serious damage to the dam.

Although 90% of unpackings go without a hitch you should always have a birthing kit on hand. The very basics of which it should contain:

- Gloves hygiene is important for you, the cria and the dam
- Towels these can be used to rub down a cria who needs a bit of help, be careful not to rub the umbilical cord
- Disinfectant spray to spray the umbilical cord
- Colostrum powder plus an appropriate feeding bottle and teat
- Cria coat if the weather is cold and miserable this will help keep the cria warm and dry, dog coats work quite well
- Cria sling and scales taking a birth weight can help determine how a cria is progressing
- Most important of all is your cellphone with your vet's phone number ready to be called

Once the cria is out it should be up and about in a couple of hours. If you have any concerns about the cria or the mother please seek professional help, preferably an alpaca savvy vet.





# Shearing time.

#### By Stephen Kellam.

Alpacas are usually shorn in late spring or early summer (ideally November) to avoid summer heat stress. It is advised that owners contact their nearest or preferred shearer at least two months in advance to ensure they are included on the shearer's circuit. The most up-to-date list of shearers can be downloaded from the AANZ website or:

#### https://www.tekorito-alpacas.co.nz/assets/pdf/table-of-shearers-2020.pdf

For shearing, choose a good spot – readily accessible for the shearer's truck and trailer, in the shade and with your alpacas penned closeby (or have helpers move animals when their turn comes). Ideally, you should be within reach of a mains power point otherwise the shearer may have to use a generator which is noisy and unpleasant for both you and the animals.

Shearers are frequently on a tight schedule so making the whole process work smoothly really helps them. Being well organised for shearing will also minimise the time your alpacas spend restrained and stressed on the table. Keeping other herd members close by and if possible visible to the animal being sheared may help calm them. If a dam has a cria, this must accompany her and be kept near her during shearing.

Alpacas cannot be sheared in the same way as sheep as they lack flexibility in their backs so other methods are used. Those used by the shearers listed are:

- Laying the alpaca on the ground with the legs restrained by straps/ropes forwards and backwards to help keep the animal still. An assistant will hold the head and manoeuver the animal.
- Laying the alpaca on a specialised shearing table. Essentially, the alpaca is walked to the table when in its vertical position, and either a sling placed around the alpaca's belly and the table rolled over to its horizontal position, or a padded press used to gently hold the animal in position whilst the table is moved to the horizontal. As above, the legs are restrained by straps/ropes to forwards and backwards securing points and a further rope may be loosely fastened around the neck to prevent the alpaca from raising its head and injuring itself. The sling or press is then removed.



# Shearing time.

Before getting started, explain to the shearer how you want your alpacas to look, for example: the head trimmed but not short, tail trimmed but left wide and how the legs should look. All owners have their preferences and in reality, the alpacas are indifferent to your choices. You have to be happy with their appearance in the paddocks for many months though!

It is recommended that for sun protection, the tail fleece should be trimmed flatter but kept long enough to cover the genital area.

There are expectations of the shearer. As a minimum standard, the shearer must conform to all relevant sections of the MPI Code of Welfare for Llamas and Alpacas (2018). Very relevant here is Section 6: Animal Handling. This forbids the lifting or dragging of alpacas by their head, neck, fleece or tail or being moved by twisting ears or tails or by lifting tails. These practices cause pain and are not allowed. If seen, the shearer must be stopped and reminded that these methods are prohibited in the Welfare Code.

During shearing, the shearer or their assistant will manouever the alpaca in a way that causes the minimum of stress to it. Electric clippers are almost always used although with different combs to those used for sheep. A skilled shearer will take under 15 minutes per animal and ideally be able to remove the fleece blanket in one piece with the minimum of second cuts. The blanket is rolled up and placed into a labelled paper sack. Second-grade fibre from the neck, legs and underside is collected into a different bag.

As the blanket is being removed, owners can take a fibre sample from the mid-side of each animal for analysis. The samples may be sent to a testing laboratory such as the New Zealand Wool Testing Authority or SGS New Zealand.

The details of this testing are outside the scope of this article but the data obtained will help in making breeding decisions, if this is your aim.

Most of the annual husbandry activities can be done at shearing time as each alpaca will be restrained on the table. Shearers or owners frequently perform the annual injections, clip toenails, check the teeth after the shearing.

- Annual injections. The following are usually given:
  - A 5-in-1 vaccine (such as Multine 5-in-1) against clostridial diseases.
  - Vitamin D supplementation if the animal is under three years old or darkly fleeced. The oil-based vitamin A, D and E supplement Hideject is commonly used. It is important that the dosage is discussed with your vet or an alpaca breeder as overdosing vitamins A and D must be avoided.
  - Worming. The frequency of worming has been the subject of much discussion and some owners prefer to drench only if worms are shown to be present in dung samples. However, owners may use the opportunity to give an injectable drench (eg. Dectomax). Others may later drench orally with Matrix.

Dosages should be discussed with your local vet or an experienced alpaca breeder.

# Shearing time.

So now the shearer has left and you have much shrunken alpacas and paper sacks full of fleeces. Each fleece blanket will require skirting, a process to remove coarse guard hair, large pieces of vegetable matter and second cut fibres. This can be done using a skirting frame which can be made by attaching large holed plastic trellis to a wooden frame of around 1 x 2 metres in size.

The blanket should be unrolled and spread out on the mesh with the cut side downwards. Shorts and dirt will immediately drop through the mesh and the frame can be rattled to help. Remove any coarse hair from the fleece edges plus sticks or other vegetable matter from the body of the fleece. It is then ready for further processing.



Alpaca fleeces always contain a lot of dust, sand or general dirt. This all needs to be removed before carding or any other use and an efficient means of doing this is use of a tumbler. There are many designs but all have a plastic mesh-sided cage which can be rolled to encourage dirt, vegetable matter and short lengths to fall out. Some tumblers are rotated using an electric motor or even attached to a concrete mixer engine. My own has hand-rotated fleece cage turning on a smooth shaft through the centre (picture above) and this can tumble around one kilogram of fleece at a time. A leaf blower used during rotation is spectacularly effective at removing the dirt and shorts. Being downwind of the drum during this process is very unpleasant!

Once complete, the fleece is ready for any final picking out of remaining vegetable matter. It can then be home or commercially carded and spun into wool or used for any other project.





## **Facial Eczema**

#### By Stephen Kellam

If there is only one article in any of our newsletters that you read and act on, I hope it is this one. Facial eczema is a very serious but avoidable disease that affects sheep, cattle, goats and especially llamas and alpacas. Alpacas should have a healthy lifespan of 15-20 years so preventing them from being affected by FE is vital.

The facial eczema season starts in early January. The disease is caused by a toxin contained in the spores of a fungus that grows on dead grass in the paddocks. Growth begins after several days of warm humid weather with night time temperatures of over 13°C, especially with rain, heavy dews or high relative humidity. The fungus can then start growing and producing spores on the ground-level decaying grass leaves.

When eaten by animals, the spores release their toxin into the gut which causes severe liver and bile duct damage. Eventually this leads to an irritating photo-sensitization of the skin which the animal tries to relieve by persistent rubbing of its head against objects (e.g. fences, trees). This causes swelling and peeling of the skin, especially around the eyes and on the jaw and ears. They may also show restlessness, urinate frequently, shake, have drooping ears and swollen eyes and seek shade to avoid sunlight. Unfortunately, by the time these symptoms are seen, damage to the liver has already happened.

Veterinary assistance is absolutely essential in treating affected animals.

#### Detection.

Counting spore numbers is a reasonable indicator of how toxic the grass in a paddock would be if eaten. There are many commercial and local veterinary services available for doing spore counts and they will explain how you should take the samples. The bagged grass samples are returned to them for sending on to the testing laboratory. Local area spore counts may be available at feed stores and vet practices. Aggregated counts for areas nationwide can be viewed on the Gribbles Veterinary website during the FE season. The graphs shown are real-time and indicate when the spore counts are climbing.

Counts in excess of 30,000 spores/g sample are regarded as hazardous to all stock. The peak of the spore counts is usually in March/April though the magnitude and exact timing will vary with seasonal conditions.

It should be noted that spore counts are highly variable between farms in the same vicinity, between paddocks at the same farm and even within a paddock. Effectively, this means that local spore counts can be taken as a guide but alpaca owners must carefully time their protective measures to ensure the health of their animals.

Even if you are unable to take spore count samples, it may be assumed that the FE season starts early in the New Year on the North Island and your preventative measures should have already started.

# **Facial Eczema**

## Protecting your alpacas.

There are four parts to achieve the best protection for your animals.

## 1. Preventing growth of the fungus

Spraying paddocks with fungicides - ideally, this should be done before the start of the season as the fungicide kills only the fungus cells and not spores already produced. Thiabendazole sprays have been shown as effective in reducing spore production throughout the facial eczema season.

Your vet or farm supply store can advise on the appropriate product and application method. Alpacas may graze the sprayed paddock only after a number of days as specified in the product description. The treatment provides a level of protection for around 6 weeks unless there is significant rainfall. Reapplication of the fungicide to each paddock will be necessary and taking samples for spore counts will indicate when the protection is fading.

## 2. The topping of pastures

This should be avoided during FE season as it increases the amount of dead material at ground level in the pasture.

3. Reducing exposure to the toxin.

- Rotate your alpacas around paddocks that have good growth on them.
- Grazing to low level must be avoided. Paddocks with minimal remaining grass should be closed off until good regrowth has occurred. Heavy rain helps by washing spores into the ground.
- Alternative feedstuffs these should be freely available during the danger periods, particularly good quality hay as they reduce the proportion of paddock grazed material

## 4. Minimising toxin damage.

Zinc supplementation is used as an effective protectant against the toxicity. Practically, zinc oxide in alpaca nuts (kibble) is the only way of getting an alpaca to consistently consume enough zinc. Sacks of kibble formulated with additional zinc are widely available from farm stores during the facial eczema season. Putting any zinc compound into the drinking water is ineffective as alpacas drink only small volumes each day and the zinc has a bitter taste. Slow release boluses (Time Capsules) and oral zinc sulphate slurries <u>must not</u> be used for alpacas as potentially toxic levels of zinc may be absorbed.

Given that it takes about two weeks for the blood zinc levels to rise to a protective state, the feeding of zinc-containing kibble is normally started by New Year. Introduction should be gradual - initially add some to normal alpaca nuts and steadily increasing the proportion over 7-10 days until the correct level is reached. Two grams of elemental zinc per 100 kg live weight per day is recommended by the feed manufacturers and scientific literature.

This means 188g of zinc kibble should be fed to each 75 kg animal per day, ideally half in the morning and the the other half at an evening feeding. <u>Always</u> mix the kibble in with a generous handful of chaff to prevent any alpaca from choking.

## **Facial Eczema**

There are no studies with alpacas into the maximum dosing period so rightly or wrongly, the recommendation for sheep is followed - 100 days (14 weeks). The graph below shows the theoretical rise and fall of spore counts over the FE season but the real shape will depend on the actual weather. Some years have actually seen two peaks separated by several weeks.



It is obvious from this graph that a return to low numbers of paddock spores may not be reached until well over the 100 day dosing period, a reality that is likely to occur more often with climate change. When this happens, many owners will continue dosing. There is a risk of a mild but reversible side-effect due to the zinc though it is a much better scenario for your alpacas when compared with death through liver failure.

In an ideal world, every alpaca owner would use all of the above measures to prevent facial eczema. In reality, few owners of small numbers of animals on lifestyle blocks will have the equipment to their spray paddocks. Feeding zinc kibble is both practical and essential for these owners. For larger block owners, boom spraying is a viable option.

All owners should manage points 2 and 3 above with alternative feeds such as hay being particularly valuable.

If you have any questions or concerns about FE or any other alpaca health matter, do seek advice from a vet.



Purely Alpacas is a mother daughter partnership of the two herds Acapella and Koroki. We have animals available for purchase and males available for stud. You can email us on purelyalpacas.nz@gmail.com for more information.

# **Your Central Region Committee**

Ros Scott	Acting President	rtg.scott71@gmail.com
Cheryl Hunter	Secretary	cherylfletcher@inspire.net.nz
Cheryl Wheatley	Committee Member	Cheryl@zl2max.gen.nz
Rachel Norman	Committee Member	rachelnorman.rn@gmail.com
Stephen Kellam	Committee Member	tekorito-alpacas@inspire.net.nz
Virginia Darlow	Committee Member	corinium@inspire.net.nz



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