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Golden fleece -- Ohio's alpaca farms have some eyeing a milling industry for the state

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Spring and summer means shearing-time on Ohio's 983 alpaca farms.

As the state with the highest number of alpacas -- about 18,000 of the animals live here -- that means a lot of alpaca fleece coming off these long-necked, doe-eyed creatures.

One alpaca might give up 4 or 5 pounds of the fluffy stuff from around its midsection. Because each alpaca must be shorn once a year, that's about 75,000 pounds of high-quality fleece annually.

And right now, much of that Ohio fleece is simply piled in barns because of a lack of mills to make it into fabric, or the fleece is given away to artisans. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Lawmakers, farmers and at least one local fashion designer see this nascent business as an industry opportunity for Ohio, which as recently as the 1970s was home to several dozen wool mills.

"My dream is that we create a cottage industry, where we once again have some mills that can ultimately turn some of the best alpaca fleece in the world into fabric for garments made in this state and in the U.S.," says U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, whose staff is working with the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center to further that cause.

Brecksville fashion designer and business owner Julie Ganim is working with Brown's office with this objective: to create a small industry of Ohio-raised, -shorn and -spun alpaca yarn that is converted into fabric then sewn into elegant suits and coats.

It's a lofty goal, she knows. But then, alpaca wool is a special kind of fiber, and it's becoming much more plentiful in Ohio.

"We can get the quality of alpaca fiber we need here, and we can make it into high-quality fabric -- we just need more facilities capable of doing that, and people with the training to do it," she says. "Alpaca clothing is a valuable commodity; it's a non-allergenic fiber that's softer than cashmere, and it's growing in importance in the fashion industry.

"Why shouldn't Ohio be part of this economic equation?"

The price of raw alpaca fleece ranges from \$1.50 to \$3.50 per ounce for prime quality blanket, which is the fleece that circles the animal's torso. About 4 or 5 pounds might come off an adult alpaca. At \$2.50 an ounce, that would be roughly \$160 to \$200 worth.

The processed yarn eventually is turned into fabric, which at current prices, sells for between \$40 and \$80 a yard.

Then, as a finished product, a well-made three-quarter- or full-length alpaca coat might cost about \$1,200. Alpaca also can be mixed with merino wool or other fibers to make it more affordable, say \$600 to \$800 a coat.

Turning Ohio alpaca fleece into high-end fabric would make it more valuable, thus allowing alpaca farmers to get more money per ounce.

This summer, Ohio law changed, too. Alpacas now are designated as livestock instead of exotic animals. The resulting tax benefits are expected to spur the selling and processing of fleece.

Alpaca pioneer

Anthony Stachowski's alpaca farm is in Mantua. He was one of the first Ohio farmers to start importing alpacas in 1984. He's a veterinarian, and his family had long been known for its Arabian horse farm, which his brothers own.

In the early 1980s, Stachowski heard that for the first time alpacas were allowed to be imported from South America and could be purchased. He wanted to get in on the business.

He knew alpacas were docile creatures that didn't require much food or pasture. He bought 25 of the animals from Chile in 1984; his were among only 150 that were imported to the United States that year.

"It was an opportunity to invest in an animal we really didn't have here," he says. "I wanted to breed them and sell them to entrepreneurs, who would enjoy raising a unique, rare and collectible animal."

His farm now has about 300 alpacas, all of them huacaya, the type of alpaca most common in the United States. A few farmers have suri alpacas, whose fleece has more of a circular, dreadlock appearance, but they are relatively rare.

While farmers have different reasons for raising alpacas, Stachowski and most others make their money by breeding the animals. They sell the alpacas at auction; they also get sire fees for some of the males.

Prices for alpacas range from \$500 up to \$300,000 for prime stud alpacas. One male alpaca at Stachowski's farm gets \$5,000 for mating, a process that takes about a half hour.

As Stachowski says, "You don't raise alpacas to sell the fiber, but it is another potential source of income," he says. And the softer the fleece the animal provides, the higher the price its owner can demand for mating it or get for selling the animal at auction. The quality of the fleece accounts for about 60 percent of the animal's value at auction.

The fleece provided by Ohio alpacas has gotten finer and softer over the years. The alpacas here don't need to forage for what they can find, as they do in the rocky Andes Mountains; they are fed a consistent and nutritionally balanced diet that ensures a silkier coat. Then, too, the alpacas with the softest fleece have been more desirable as breeders, so genetically over the years, animals with the more luxurious fleece have proliferated.

What comes next

After the fleece is sheared, it very well may pile up in barns and eventually dry up, says Jana Lee Harris, an alpaca farmer in Pataskala, Ohio, who is also spokeswoman for the Ohio Alpaca Breeders Association. More likely, though, the alpaca farmers give the fleece away to artisan or guild groups that spin it into yarn. Those groups then give the yarn or products knitted from it back to the farmers.

A very few alpaca farmers, if they have the time, skills and equipment, spin their own fleece into fibers, or they might soak the fleece to make felt for use in handcrafts.

Many alpaca farmers will send their usable fleece to the Alpaca Fiber Cooperative of North America, which divides up a collective amount and either sends the suppliers money or gives them discounts on alpaca-fiber products the co-op makes, such as socks.

Some alpaca farmers will send the fleece from their animals to one of a handful of cottage mills (none are currently in Northeast Ohio), where the fleece will be processed and spun into yarn, some of which might make its way into luxury fabric.

Ganim and Brown want that last category to grow.

"If we could get the fleece made into yarn, create more mini-mills, it would be a great thing for Ohio," says Brown. "It's like what we tried to do in the farm bill, by having more fruits and vegetables be sold locally to senior centers.

"It's a clean industry, and it shows how innovative Ohio can be."

While efforts are in the preliminary stages, Ohio's alpaca industry is getting more notice: the National Alpaca Conference will hold its annual show in Cleveland in June and the National Alpaca Fleece Show also will be here next spring.

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