

# Fibre Tips

## WEIGHING FLEECES

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All alpaca breeders need to be able to weigh their fleeces.

Fleece weights are one of just a few parameters that are vital to the record of any alpaca breeding program. They are as basic and as important as the more commonly promoted results of fibre testing, such as mean fibre diameter because, however you look at it, the financial returns on sale of fleece will primarily be determined by fibre diameter and fleece weights.

But when was the last time you saw an advertisement for a stud male advertising annual fleece weights? Well, you will in time, as breeders become more astute and more demanding. Perhaps it is because alpacas are not shorn exactly every 12 months that breeders do not advertise annual fleece weights. Perhaps it is because they have never *been* shorn, only trimmed for every approaching show appearance (looking like gorillas, with a face and neck buried deeply in a halo of hair). Or perhaps they are old, or working hard. Or perhaps they don't *produce* much fleece weight, because they are small, lack density, or have ultrafine fleece (remember, that a 25% increase in fibre diameter will produce a 56% increase in fleece weight, all other factors remaining the same, whilst a 50% increase in fibre diameter will produce a 125% increase in fleece weight).

The reasons *why* an annual fleece weight might be high or low is a matter for individual assessment. *But you should at least expect to know that weight if you are a buyer of alpacas or of stud services.*

There are still many other good reasons to weigh fleece: to set prices for private fleece sale; to record the amount of fleece being consigned for sale; to monitor the yearly performance of a given alpaca; to compare the performance of sires over a given dam. In short, *every* alpaca breeder needs a quick, accurate, reproducible and cheap way to weigh fleeces.

At Illawarra Alpacas, we have been weighing our alpacas regularly as a part of herd management for many years, and have a set of agricultural electronic scales for that purpose. They are ideal for quickly weighing *animals*, with the option of an automatic download onto our computer and our alpaca herd management program. They also have the facility to alter the weighing scale, so that fleeces can be weighed to an accuracy of one decimal point (100gms).

We thought that this would be adequate, and so used it for one season. But whilst it proved useful enough for large quantities of fleece, such as a bale, we found that this level of accuracy and reproducibility was not good enough for individual fleeces. Consider, for example, weighing a cria saddle of 500 grams with a limit of 100 grams accuracy.

We have since turned to a more accurate and economical alternative, in the common digital, battery-powered kitchen scales, which offer accuracy to within 5 gms, and can weigh loads of up to 10 kgs. They are available at most hardware and appliance stores for under \$100. Nothing very new about that, to be sure, as alpaca growers have been using them widely for some time. Our problem was that, when attempting to put the fleece to be weighed on the weighing plate, it would topple off or obscure the digital readout, and our efforts were less than quick and accurate.

*Here is the simple solution!* Have your kitchen scales sitting on a narrow bench or table, say about 30 cms wide and four feet from the floor. As few tables and benches fit these specifications, make up your own, even if it is a plank of timber strung between two 45-gallon drums. Balance a short piece of flat timber, say a 50cm length of light 15 x 30 mm pine, across the scales so that it overlaps the edges of the table on either side. Then suspend a light receptacle from each end of the timber, so that it is stable, and doesn't tip: a plastic laundry basket would be fine.

Now, tare the scales so that they read zero. Fleeces in their plastic bags may now be thrown with scant regard into the basket, and the scales read comfortably at table height. The scale returns to zero instantly the load is removed, and the next fleece then weighed as instantly as the first. In this way (weigh!), we were able to weigh saddle, neck and remainders for about 100 fleeces in little over one hour, and to an accuracy of 5 gms.

*Better statistics will make for better breeding, and better breeding will return better statistics.*

Away, and weigh!

