

Alternatives to Pellets: Introduction

*By Lark L. Burnham, Ph.D.
Ruminant Nutrition*

The recession was hard on all kinds of businesses, large and small. Alpaca producers were not exempt. Many have been forced to down-size or go out of business altogether. Others are desperately searching to find a less expensive way to feed their beloved animals. This series will eventually detail how the average alpaca producer can streamline their feeding system and gain control in the process.

Two approaches will be discussed here. At the core of both of them, however, are the following requirements:

- Body scoring 3 — 4 times a year, minimum. This is so you are fully aware of what the new feeding system is doing to your animals. Pellet alternatives usually contain more protein and energy than a similar quantity of pellets, so must be fed at a lower rate to avoid obesity and its myriad consequences. The minimum is three times a year — shearing, birth, and weaning. The first is the easiest time to score and the other two are critical times in the breeding female's life. If possible, body scoring should also be done midway between birth and weaning, and midway between weaning and the next birth. This will help you be ready to supplement after weaning,

if necessary, and then check to see if the supplementation worked.

- If fiber quality is important to the survival of your business, than get fiber analysis done. This can be limited to your breeding females, since they are the ones that will get the most exposure to any new protein and energy supplement.
- Wean adult males off pellets and other protein/energy supplements unless they are underweight. They do not have the enormous energy requirements of a lactating female. Excess protein and energy decreases fiber quality and may lead to obesity and reduced fertility.
- Any changes in feeding practices need to be made gradually over at least two weeks time. This is to accommodate the shift in rumen microbial populations. Old feed needs to be mixed with a small amount of new feed in the usual amount. Eventually, the new feed will completely replace the old feed. This needs to be fed initially in an amount less than that of the pellets, as discussed above. Alpacas will be suspicious of the new feed when it is first introduced, but will usually be eating it with gusto by the second day.
- A mineral mix that is locally procured is recommended in place of expensive mineral mixes purchased online. These may be found at local

feed stores and feed mills. If your area has high soil copper levels, than choose a sheep mineral mix, they are formulated without added copper.

Otherwise, either a cattle mix that is appropriate for your feeding situation (pasture vs. dry lot) or an all-purpose livestock mineral mix (one that can be used by cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens, etc.). Mineral mix must always be available, changed every week or so, and protected from the elements. If your animals have been unenthusiastic about minerals in the past, try adding a small amount of cracked corn or crimped oats and mixing well. If on pasture, place the mineral dispenser near the water source.

Suggested:

- Group feeding by sex and stage of reproduction
- Regular use of high quality probiotics to prevent stress-related illness and decrease requirement for veterinary assistance.

This is just an overview of some of the things that will be required of the producer. See if they are in line with what you already do, or can be eased into without difficulty. Next issue will detail the first of the protein and energy choices that are readily available and for much less than you pay for pellets.

About the Author:

Lark Burnham received a B.S. in Animal Science (1979) from Kansas State University and an M.S. in non-ruminant nutrition (1995) from Kansas State University, Manhattan, and a Ph.D. Doctorate in ruminant nutrition (2004) from Texas Tech University, Lubbock. Her special interests are comparative nutrition, the role of the micro flora in all mammals, fiber digerstion, and probiotics. Lark currently works for Natur's Way, Inc., Horton, KS which produces MSE probiotics.



www.natures-way.com

MSE

**Cares for All your animals
From head to tail!**

MSE
Has been shown to improve
Growth performance
Feed efficiency
Fiber quality

*Natur's
Way, Inc.*

Natur's Way, Inc.
Horton, KS
800-615-0299

Photos courtesy of Geri Becker, Soggy Bottom Ranch, WI (Miniature Horse)
And Amanda Evans, Sagebrush Alpacas, NM (Alpaca Cría)