

# A Call for Common Sense and Profits

By

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Common sense . . . it's no longer a prerequisite for human survival, at least not in the literal sense. Modern society casts a wide protective safety net over those among us who lack common sense. It seems to me that, unfortunately, it is neither necessary nor desirable to have common sense in order to make a living or reach the top of the "food chain" in some professions.

## *Farmers with Common Sense*

That said, there nevertheless remains a segment of the population that cannot succeed without common sense, even in this day and age. Owners of small family farms must be industrious, frugal, and "wear multiple hats" to realize an annual profit from their labor. They must be practical and pragmatic. Smart farmers are open to new ideas while at the same time resist change purely for its own sake. They are humble and freely ask for advice, yet are bold enough to question the wisdom of university educated agricultural experts. Farmers must respect and even fear Nature, but also trust her to teach them how to care for and benefit from her resources.

Above all, owners of small farms must possess common sense in abundance. Nobody who has *successfully* farmed on small acreage with modest financial means will dispute the last statement.

The majority of alpaca farmers have small farms and/or small herds. As we join the larger agricultural community, clever marketing alone will not be enough to keep a farm profitable. Alpaca farmers will need to practice the same self reliance, thrift, and just plain, old common sense that has always helped farmers survive during hard times as well as thrive during financially favorable years.

Take home lesson: Farmers with common sense will survive hard times.
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What is common sense? In my opinion, it is best defined by presenting concrete examples of times when the common man stopped trusting and using his own good sense. I am a firm believer in learning valuable lessons from the senseless follies committed by others. No need to go where others have already sunk up to their necks into the quicksand of farming without using common sense. Often the quicksand looked attractive and even brought temporary success. It eventually always doomed those who naively trusted in the wisdom of Ivory Tower “experts” and Big Agribusiness.

Let’s review a few examples.

### *The Dust Bowl*

The American Dust Bowl of the Great Plains bankrupted thousands of farmers and forced them to abandon their lands. The Dust Bowl was created by poor farming practices. The main culprits were farmers who removed natural wind barriers and created erosion of top soil by not

planting cover crops. The unfortunate Dust Bowl farmers lost everything due to a catastrophe of their own making.

Take Home lesson: Farmers with common sense work in harmony with Nature.
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### *Cow Penitentiaries*

In *Deeply Rooted: Unconventional Farmers in the Age of Agribusiness* (Lisa M. Hamilton), dairy farmer Harry Lewis practices pasture farming in Sulphur Springs, Texas, and sells his organic milk through a co-operative. Lewis calls dairies where cows are confined in barns 24/7 “cow penitentiaries” and insists that “it ain’t farming”. Confinement, feeding huge amounts of grain, and the use of growth hormones push milk production to ever higher levels. Many of the cows maintained in such a system suffer from acidosis, ketosis, bad feet, mastitis, udder edema, and a displaced abomasum. The latter needs to be surgically corrected. Paul Dettloff D.V.M. squarely places the blame on a diet he describes as “totally wrong” for ruminants. He calls the DA cows “practice builders”, as in building up the profits of his own veterinary practice. Dr. Dettloff’s clients experienced a drastic drop in cow health problems when they switched to grazing and feeding more forage.

How smart is it to push for maximum production when veterinary expenses eat up your profits?

Is it wise for alpaca breeders to push for huge increases in fleece density and/or staple length?

Are we so arrogant or naive that we believe such extreme genetic manipulations will not have negative consequences for our species?

Take home lesson: Farmers with common sense know that profits, not income, define financial reality.

### *Merino Madness*

During the 1920's, North American breeders of Merino sheep were duped into selecting for animals with a loose, stretchy skin. The objective was to produce more and finer fiber. Merino sheep came to resemble Shar-Pei dogs with fleece. Shearing became an ordeal for both sheep and shearers. Micron count varied considerably between fiber growing inside the skin folds and fiber growing outside the folds. Skin problems plagued the animals with extreme folds. The Merino sheep fiasco surely ranks as one of the most bizarre examples of livestock farming at its worst.

Are alpacas headed in the same direction? Without prompting, a fellow breeder volunteered information about a loose skinned alpaca female boarded on her farm. "We had one heck of a time shearing her," she told me. "Afterwards, it looked like the body walked away and the skin followed. It was so weird, I can't properly describe it."

Recently I had a very disturbing conversation with a fellow who shears thousands of alpacas each year. He told me that, during the 2009 shearing season, he saw for the first time numerous alpacas with a "strange skin fold". The best I could gather over the phone was that this fold of loose skin was located where belly and thigh form an inverted V-shaped crease. "There was so

much loose skin that I had to adjust my shearing technique so I would not cut the animals,” the shearer explained. He literally had to gather the loose skin with one hand while shearing around it with the other. This fellow had no hidden motives and had nothing to gain by sharing the information. He refused to reveal the names of the farms where he had encountered alpacas with skin folds but made it clear that the number of animals with folds presented a significant percentage. Alpaca madness?

Take home lesson: Breeders with common sense know that extreme manipulations of functional genetic traits will have negative repercussions.

### *It Takes Two, Baby ...*

Actually, it doesn't take two, and that's the problem. Unilateral cryptorchids (males with only one testicle descended into the scrotum) are capable of siring offspring. If the defect is not discovered or a breeder hides the fact that it exists, a male may have ample opportunities to pass it on.

Since a unilateral cryptorchid is fertile, what's the big deal? The undescended testicle often becomes cancerous. An operation to remove it is much more invasive and therefore more costly than gelding an intact male with both testicles descended into the scrotum. An ethical breeder will take a financial loss on a cryptorchid.

It's a common defect in many species, including humans. A report of male puppies born in a Whippet litter always elicits the identical questions from experienced breeders, "Do they have both?" Nobody needs to explain that it's not ears or eyes they are inquiring about.

I don't think it's quite as common in alpacas (only guessing), but I know that the defect occurs. I remember checking out a well advertised and widely used herdsire at the request of a friend. This happened about a decade ago. One testicle looked and felt normal. The other one was nowhere to be seen. When I questioned the farm's manager, she airily dismissed my concerns. "He's made plenty of babies with that one good one," she told me. I bet he did!

<p>Take home message: Farmers with common sense check out more than micron count and "helmet heads" before spending their money.</p>
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### *Show Me the Money!*

Unfortunately, the show ring is often a place where common sense has been totally abandoned. The crippled rear ends of German Shepherd dogs and the nearly floor length coats of show winning Afghan Hounds are only two examples of human selection pressure run amok. Dogs aren't livestock, but they serve as valid examples to make my point.

My husband and I owned several Afghan Hounds in the late sixties and seventies. Coat length and lack of guard hair made grooming a nightmare. We finally kept their coats clipped short and, upon their deaths of old age, replaced them with "wash and wear" Whippets.

Angora rabbits also have no guard hair. Maintenance of their fiber is a time consuming chore and must be performed weekly to prevent severe matting.

Quite frequently, I see statements made by alpaca breeders who wish to breed out all guard hair from their camelids. I mentioned this goal to a breeder of Maltese dogs, and she asked curiously, “Aren’t alpacas livestock and graze outdoors?” When I answered in the affirmative, the woman laughed heartily. She explained that her Maltese have no guard hair. They can’t ever be permitted to be outside in wind or rain to prevent matting. Their coats must be brushed daily for the same reason.

Is breeding out all guard hair and/or medullated fiber a sensible goal for alpaca breeders? We won’t know until alpacas without guard hair live in our herds. My bet is that we’ll see felted fleeces and reduced profits from fiber sales. There is a reason why vicuñas have guard hair. As breeders, we should take our clues from natural selection.

<p>Take home lesson: Farmers with common sense carefully analyze traits rewarded in the show ring with a healthy dose of skepticism.</p>
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### *The Sperm Killers*

In his book on ruminants, Dr. Dettloff writes: “The next debacle in veterinary medicine that will spill over into human health will be a hormone-related problem in our food that will affect the

next generation of people via the endocrine system by an imbalance. If there is ever a reason to return to the natural ways of animal husbandry, hormones are the reason.”

Scientists determined that today’s young, human males have lower sperm counts than men of previous generations. There is concern about the harmful effects of young girls reaching puberty at increasingly earlier ages. Blame is placed on growth and performance promoting hormones injected into farm animals (meat, milk) and phytoestrogens in our environment (for example, those found in plastics). Consumer pressure led many dairy farmers to discontinue the use of recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST).

The field of livestock reproduction is awash in hormones. Many camelid breeders have expressed an interest in artificial insemination and embryo transfer. Research has gone forward, and articles have been published. The ones I’ve read all acknowledged difficulties but presented the procedures in a favorable light. None of the authors even hinted at the possible physical harm inflicted on the humans who handle the hormones and/or may be exposed to hormonal excretions via animal urine, fecal matter and saliva.

Have any health studies been conducted to determine how hormones administered to camelids affect their human care takers? Are increased profits worth the risk of potentially harming farm family members and hired staff?

Whose profits are we talking about anyhow? What has worked well in other species is difficult to achieve with camelids, which are induced ovulators. Using artificial insemination, the



pregnancy rate of alpacas has been dismally low. Of course, the clever marketers selling “valuable” semen straws will earn plenty of money. Veterinarians will profit from repeated farm visits to inject hormones, inseminate, and check for pregnancy status. I predict that the average breeder paying for straws or embryos and veterinary services will not see a profit.

The purchase of a good quality male need not break the farm’s “bank” if breeders look in the right places or are willing to “grow out” a very young but promising male.

Alpaca males are not dangerous, unlike the sexually mature males of other species. They’re not expensive to maintain. Genetic diversity? Unless a breeder lives in a very remote area of the country, access to just about any existing bloodline is easily accomplished.

I firmly believe in the importance of breeding stock proving their reproductive soundness through natural breedings. A semen straw tells me nothing about a male’s libido. An alpaca embryo transplanted into a llama female tells me nothing about the ability of the embryo’s biological dam to give birth easily, her milk supply, and mothering skills.

Common sense, however, tells me that artificial insemination and embryo transfer will not be profitable programs on the vast majority of small family alpaca farms.

Take home message: Farmers with common sense question the impact of hormonal treatments on health and profits.

*SRL (Standard Research Lunacy) = SED (Standard Error of the Difference) – CD (Common Sense)*

The August 2009 issue of the *Eastern Dairy Reporter* presented readers with the results of several research studies published in the 2009 *Journal of Dairy Science*. One of the topics: *Preference and usage of pasture versus free-stall housing by lactating dairy cattle*.

The report included important looking mathematical formulas and scientific alphabet soup such as  $SED = 0.21 \text{ h/d}$ . The scientists had concluded that “under the housing and environmental conditions tested, cows showed a strong preference for access to pasture at night and for access to indoor housing during the day when temperature and humidity increased.”

It took two or more scientists to figure this out? Where is the common sense of the people who sponsored this study? Who paid for it? Hopefully not the nation’s small dairy producers who are barely making ends meet on their farms.

Any child growing up on a farm with grazing dairy cows would know that cows seek shade during high temperatures coupled with high humidity. Any illiterate nomadic herdsman could tell you that ruminants will graze at night if oppressive heat keeps them relatively immobile during the day. It’s common sense, for crying out loud!

Is dairy research science so removed from the normal behavior of grazing ruminants that it needs a study to figure out the obvious? I used to feel that Gene Logsdon (*All Flesh is Grass*) was just a tad too harsh in his hard hitting comments on government funded, agricultural research projects. No more! We desperately need people like Gene Logsdon in agriculture. We need men and women who are not afraid to point out that the Emperor is not wearing clothes, and that he strips farmers naked who join his parade.

Will tax payers or alpaca breeders be funding nugatory research to study whether unshorn alpacas are more prone to heat stress than shorn alpacas? Alan Rosenbloom, MD laughed when I asked him about this possibility. “No, I don’t think that the ARF board of directors will ever approve funding for such a study,” he assured me.

Fortunately, the *Alpaca Research Foundation* is a shining example of common sense being applied to the selection and funding of scientific, peer reviewed research projects.

I asked Dr. Rosenbloom about ARF policy. He answered candidly: “As a foundation, we have to be practical. Our studies all have to go in a very specific direction. Would our policy change if the ARF had unlimited funds? I don’t think so.”

Dr. Rosenbloom explained how ARF committee members try to balance the wider focus of scientific academic research with the “close horizon” of practical applicability. “We need both,” he stated firmly.

Alpaca breeders who ignore ARF funded research shortchange their animals and, in some cases, deplete their farm's profits needlessly. A good example are the dollars some breeders continue to spend on oral Omeprazole (GastroGard). Two separate, published ARF studies proved that the drug has no efficacy in alpacas.

Take home lessons: Breeders with common sense support the Alpaca Research Foundation  
([www.alpacaresearchfoundation.com](http://www.alpacaresearchfoundation.com))

### *My Own Drum?*

“Oh, you always march to the beat of your own drum,” a breeder dismissed my warnings about lack of bio-security at a large show where she was an exhibitor. This was the year 2000. Of course, history proved me right, and breeders soon scrambled to educate themselves about infectious diseases such as BVDV and Corona Virus.

March to the beat of my own drum? Hardly! Long before I purchased my first alpacas, I ordered *The Merck Veterinary Manual* and read about disease issues of cattle, sheep, and goats. Common sense told me that alpacas would be vulnerable to some and possibly most of those diseases. Reading Dr. Fowler's *Medicine and Surgery of South American Camelids* confirmed this.

Instead of marching to my own drum, I march to the drum beat of my mentors. I pay special attention to those who reject the destructive practices of conventional agriculture and reap profits

by working in harmony with Nature. My mentors are a diverse group and include pasture farmer Gene Logsdon, organic livestock advisor Jerry Brunetti, goat breeder Pat Coleby, veterinarian Dr. Dettloff, and many others. Once, when I had demonstrated a definite lapse in common sense while trying to diagnose an alpaca's problem, local livestock veterinarian Dr. Bill Pettit had gently chided me, "When you hear hoof beats, think horses, not zebras." I'll never forget nor will I ignore his advice!

Why would I march to the beat of my own drum? I wouldn't have access to information about color genetics presented by Dr. Phillip Sponenberg, DVM, PhD, learn about alpaca fiber properties without hidden marketing objectives from Eric Hoffman, and receive sensible advice on handling and training from *Camelidynamics* instructors Marty McGee Bennett and Dorothy Hunt.

Profits? Yes, I've made profits on our small alpaca farm. There are many reasons for that. Not the least is the common sense advice my friend Carol Masters gave me years ago. Carol expertly built and maintains our farm's website. What she told me was, "A bird in the hand is better than two in a bush." That seemingly silly, little sentence represents the core of my business philosophy, and it's worked for me. Carol also always stresses that, in any business deal, *both* parties should leave the table happy with the results. I work very hard to make that a rule when selling or purchasing alpacas. Thank God for Carol's re-assuring and common sense drum beat over the years!

Take home lesson: Farmers with common sense march to the drum beats of mentors who have common sense.

### *Generations of Farmers*

I am most grateful to the many generations of farmers in my family. They were practical and frugal people and set great examples. All had common sense. None were swayed or impressed by clever marketing. Instead, they were not afraid to listen to their own inner voices and follow their own, healthy instincts. I am lucky.

Many alpaca breeders are first generation farmers. If difficulties arise, they should remember that all established multi generational farm families started with that one individual who decided to farm and did not give up when things got tough. The soldier, the sailor, the inn keeper, the carpenter, the car mechanic ... it was that one man or woman who decided to try his or her hand at farming and thus started a family tradition. Common sense cannot replace knowledge and experience, but it'll go a long way to help a first generation farmer succeed.

The owners of small family farms rarely make a lot of money. In many farm families, both husband and wife have “outside” jobs.

Those who stay on the land despite only modest profits do so because they feel a passion for farming and can't imagine *not* working on their farm. To quote an old East Prussian proverb: I'd rather eat bread on my farm than cake in town.

When I contemplate profits in farming, my thoughts move well beyond the money deposited in a bank account. In my opinion, no work is as deeply satisfying as working on and with the land. Caring for gentle, environmentally friendly livestock like alpacas is truly an additional blessing.

In my extended family, only a cousin and I are still farming. It makes me sad to think that a centuries old family legacy may be gone with our generation. Perhaps my son and his family will eventually discover the true peace and contentment of life on a farm, however small. I know that my grandchildren will profit from the lessons of strength, thrift, endurance, patience, and common sense that the land offers to those who are willing to learn.

As I watch my little grandson beg to be taken outside, no matter what the weather, I smile. He likes to dig in the dirt with his bare hands, I noticed. There's hope! Blood will tell. It's only common sense!

"I learned from him that you worked not to be rich but to be free." (Harry Lewis, quoting his father in *Deeply Rooted*)