

THE ALASKA NATURAL FIBER BUSINESS ASSOCIATION:

Connecting Alaska's Fiber Community

Jan Rowell and Lee Coray-Ludden

A one-and-a-half day workshop in the fall of 2012 rekindled a passion for community among Alaska's fiber producers and artists. "Fiber Production in Alaska: From Agriculture to Art" provided a rare venue for fiber producers and consumers to get together and share a strong common interest in fiber production in Alaska. The workshop was sponsored by the Alaska State Division of Agriculture and organized by Lee Coray-Ludden, owner of Shepherd's Moon Keep and a cashmere producer.

There is nothing new about fiber production in Alaska. The early Russians capitalized on agricultural opportunities wherever they could and domestic sheep and goats were a mainstay in these early farming efforts. But even before the Russians, fiber was historically used for warmth by Alaska's indigenous people. They gathered their fiber from wild sources, and some tribes handspun it and wove it into clothing, creating beautiful works of art.

Some of the finest natural fibers in the world come from animals that evolved in cold, dry climates, and many of these animals are grazers capable of thriving on Alaska's natural vegetation. Within the state there is tremendous diversity in the animals being raised for fiber: bison, yak, llama and alpaca, cashmere goats, and many types of sheep

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Angora rabbits produce a soft and silky fiber finer than cashmere. Pictured below is Michael, a German angora, shortly before shearing. Angora rabbits may be sheared, plucked gently, or combed to obtain their downy hair.

—PHOTO BY BECKY HAMMOND



The Alaska Natural Fiber Business Association: Mission & Goals

Mission:

The ANFBA serves and supports the Alaskan fiber producer and fiber artist by strengthening Alaska's natural fiber industry, economy and marketplace.

Goals:

- Develop and maintain a business network based on Alaska natural fibers
- Promote and support sustainable natural fiber production and agriculture in Alaska
- Support family farms in Alaska
- Promote sustainable in-state processing for Alaska natural fibers
- Identify and develop Alaska natural fiber marketing structures
- Increase professional opportunities and market access for producers and artists
- Coordinate products and services to maximize efficient production, distribution and use of Alaska natural fibers
- Develop quality standards for both fiber production and processing
- Disseminate information to members, affiliate organizations and the public regarding Alaska natural fibers

Surveys:

The ANFBA conducts ongoing surveys of the fiber production and fiber use industry in Alaska. If you are a fiber **producer or a fiber artist, you can join** this developing network or contribute to knowledge of the state of the Alaska fiber industry by filling out the appropriate survey, found on line at their website, or on pages 32–34, and mail to the address below.

Contact information:

Website:

<http://alaskanaturalfiberbusinessassociation.webs.com>

Address:

ANFBA, PO Box 254, Clam Gulch, AK 99568

President & contact: Lee Coray-Ludden,
(907) 394-6146, aknfb@gmail.com

(Shetland, Black Welsh, Mountain, and Icelandic sheep, to list just a few). Then there are muskoxen, an animal indigenous to the North that produces a fiber recognized as one of the finest natural fibers currently on the market. Alaska leads the world in the production of qiviut from farmed muskoxen. Our arctic/subarctic climate poses no barrier to growing high-quality fiber and production is not only possible here, it's an ideal fit for the state's grazing ecosystems.

Despite Alaska's suitability, fiber production is not an industry here—not yet. The reasons for raising fiber-producing animals are as diverse as the species themselves, while the barriers to growing this industry are common to all. Farms are small and scattered across a huge state. There is no organization or system for the collection and marketing of locally produced natural fibers. Because of this, as well as raising the animals, the farmer has to take on the additional work involved to prepare, market, and sell the fiber. Added to this is the lack of in-state fiber processing. Taking wool to the next level—whether it is felted, carded, spun, and/or dyed—requires shipping to a woolen mill in the Lower 48 or, once again, having it all hand done by the producer or artist wishing to use local fiber. With few exceptions, this bottleneck relegates Alaska's fiber potential to novelty status.

The Alaska Natural Fiber Business Association (ANFBA)

A survey circulated after the 2012 meeting found an overwhelming 95% of responding artists and craftspeople would prefer to use Alaska Grown fibers in their work and that 83% of all respondents were interested in an association/cooperative that included value-added marketing support. Building on the energy generated at the meeting and through the dedicated volunteer efforts of the Steering Committee, the Alaska Natural Fiber Business Association (ANFBA) was created.

In the spring of 2013 the group established its official name, mission statement, and goals, and as of 2014 the association achieved nonprofit status. The questions became “What next and how?”

The information collected through surveys has provided a good base of preliminary data, but the picture is far from complete. Because fiber producers and artists are scattered throughout the state, communication is central to our continued success.

A website has been established and is being developed. With a web presence ANFBA members can post information related to available fiber and fiber needs. Members can search for assistance, information and ideas, and find common solutions to shared problems.

The very nature of fiber encourages creative value-added cooperatives and marketing structures. The fiber producer can benefit from cooperatives for purchasing supplies, services such as artificial insemination, breeding stock, and culled livestock. The fiber artist or craftsperson can benefit from cooperatives that include fiber sources and pool marketing efforts.



Flock of Shetland sheep at Calypso Farm and Ecology Center, near Ester in the Interior. Note the jacket worn by the sheep at far right to keep its coat clean.

—PHOTO BY GERRIT VYN



Michael the Angora rabbit during shearing.

—PHOTO BY BECKY HAMMOND

Cashmere doe and kid at Shepherd's Moon Keep Farm in Clam Gulch.

—PHOTO BY L. COREY-LUDDEN





Wild Fibers, a magazine dedicated to understanding the role natural fibers have played in developing cultures and supporting communities throughout the world, hosted a tour in Alaska and came to the University of Alaska Fairbanks this March, where participants met with SNRE assistant research professor Jan Rowell to discuss qiviut. Above, a tour participant explores the amazing softness of a raw qiviut fleece.

—PHOTO BY NANCY TARNAI

Marketing of fiber products was identified as a priority and need in two different surveys conducted in Alaska, once in 1995 and again in 2013.* An association collectively has the ability to help the individual market their products. This can be accomplished by: identifying and disseminating information on local venues; tapping into established media networks; establishing standards and guidelines; creating a recognizable Alaska brand; and ultimately connecting producers, artists, and craftspeople with Alaska's diverse and well-established tourism industry.

Through an ANFBA network, grassroots support can be harnessed to look into options for growing Alaska's fiber industry. Participants at the meeting in 2012 voiced overwhelming support for the establishment of in-state fiber processing. Without the ability to mill fiber in Alaska, the critical value-added component is lost to most small farms. Starting a mill is a big financial proposition, and

requires careful planning and research. The ANFBA is the perfect umbrella organization to carry out a feasibility study and investigate creative options and alternatives for a mill.

Natural fiber has commercial potential far beyond the production of yarn. Its fire retardant properties and resistance to mildew make it a natural insulator. Businesses in the Lower 48 like Good Shepherd Wool (Alberta, Canada, and Florida) and Black Mountain Sheep (distributing nationally throughout the US) make wool insulation as batts, rope, rolls, insulation panels, and fill. In Oregon Jetson Green has been chopping up industrial-grade yarn and using it as blow-in insulation for homes. Lower quality fleeces can be felted and used as oil spill batts (biodegradable), bioremediation batts for streams and roadsides (no seeds and biodegradable), or liners for hanging baskets and mulching for gardens, especially under perennials.

The development of a fiber business/marketing network diversifies



In May 2013, UAF released a video featuring Rowell that showed how to comb the blanket of qiviut shed by muskoxen. Muskoxen release their qiviut in a synchronous shed, or all over their bodies at once. This is unlike dogs, for example, which shed sporadically, or sheep, which must be sheared. To view the video, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSFeO4aN_0g&feature=youtu.be.

—PHOTO BY NANCY TARNAI

income opportunities in rural Alaska beginning with the fiber producer and reaching out to include a web of interrelated businesses. But best of all, a fiber network provides an all-Alaska outlet for a shared, common passion: fiber, from agriculture to art, shared on many levels by many people. It's like a favored yarn store, you don't go there just to buy yarn—you go there to be wowed by all the colors, feel the sundry textures, marvel at the creativity, and share it all with friends and new friends. The ANFBA may be a virtual room, but it's still a fiber sanctuary where the conversation can continue.



* Editor's note: the surveys are ongoing; reprints of these surveys are on the following pages, and can be found at the association website.

Alaska Fiber Survey – Producers

This survey is designed to help the ANFBA determine the feasibility of a natural fiber processing facility in Alaska. The contact information you provide will also contribute to a statewide network of producers who are interested in possible associations and cooperatives for processing, breeding, and marketing of natural fibers in Alaska. Feel free to share this survey with other Alaska fiber producers who you think would be interested in offering feedback. The economic development potential is substantial if we work together.

Name:

Farm/Ranch/Business Name:

Mailing Address:

Phone: E-mail:

Number of years in production:

*Background image:
Sabrina, a Shetland sheep
living at Calypso Farm &
Ecology Center.
—PHOTO BY GERRIT VYN*

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Natural Fiber Producer Questions

1. Type and number of fiber animals you own:

Breed:

How many:

Males/Females:

2. Amount of fiber produced per year?

Type of fiber:

Amount produced (lbs ozs):

3. How is the fiber harvested? (select all that apply)

Combed Shorn manually Shorn w/electric clippers Self-heaved

4. Do you shear yourself? (select one) Yes No

Comments:

5. Do you provide stud services? (select one) Yes No

Breed:

Type:

Contact phone or e-mail

6. Have you used AI? (select one) Yes No

If yes, what was the outcome?

Breed AI used with:

Outcome:

What happens to your fiber?

7. How do you store your fleeces post-shearing/combing?

Tie your fleece? Yes No

Bag your fleece? Yes No

Type of bag (select one): Plastic Cloth Other

Comments:

8. Do you personally process your fiber? (select one) Yes No

If yes, I personally process my fiber by (select all that apply)

Washing Picking Carding Spinning into yarn Other

Comments:

9. I send my fiber to a commercial mill for processing (select all that apply)

Batts Roving Cloud Yarn Other

10. Which mills have you liked/used?

11. Do you sell your fleeces? (select one) Yes No

If yes, how do you sell it? (select all that apply)

Raw in the grease Hand processed at home Processed at a mill

Value-added processed (spun, finished product, etc.) Other

Comments:

12. Do you store the fleece and do nothing with it? (select one) Yes No

13. Who do you sell to? (select all that apply)

Individuals Commercial Guilds Other

Comments:

14. How do you market your fleece? (select all that apply)

Formal advertising Word of mouth Other

Comments:

15. If you have used formal advertising, what method did you use (select all that apply)

Trade mag/newsletter Trade/craft shows Farmers Market Other

Comments:

16. What barriers have you found in marketing?

17. What workshops would you like to attend or teach?

18. Are you interested in an association/cooperative to increase your success?

If you know of other AK producers who would like to be part of this conversation that we should contact please provide their information below.

Name:

Contact Info (phone/e-mail):

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey! Please return it by e-mail or mail to:

Lee Coray-Ludden, leeaq7175@gmail.com, PO Box 254, Clam Gulch, AK 99568. Phone: (907) 394-6146

Alaska Fiber Survey – Fiber Artists

This survey is designed to help the ANFBA determine the feasibility of a natural fiber processing facility in Alaska. The contact information you provide will also contribute to a statewide network of fiber artists who are interested in possible associations and cooperatives for processing, breeding, and marketing of natural fibers in Alaska. Feel free to share this survey with other fiber artists who you think would be interested in offering feedback. The potential is substantial if we work together.

Name:

Farm/Ranch/Business Name:

Mailing Address:

Phone: E-mail:

Number of years in production:

Natural Fiber Artist Questions

1. What do you use natural fibers for? (select all that apply)

Quilt batting Knitting Crocheting Spinning Weaving Felting Other

Comments:

2. How do you purchase your fiber? (select all that apply)

Catalogs Internet Guilds Co-op Raise your own Neighbors/friends Local
Producers/Farmers Other

Comments:

3. What condition do you like to purchase in? (select all that apply)

Raw & skirted Roving Batting Spun Other

Comments:

4. What volume do you usually purchase? (select all that apply)

Whole fleece Pound

What quantity do you purchase annually?

Comments:

5. What type of fiber do you require? (select all that apply)

Fine wool Medium/Downy Wool Long Wool
Alpaca Llama Cashmere Bison Angora Mohair Yak Qiviut Other

Comments:

6. What do you use the fiber for? (select all that apply)

Personal Gifts For Sale Other

Comments:

7. Are you interested in local wool/fiber for your art? (select one) Yes No

Comments:

8. What barriers have you found in marketing your finished product?

9. Would you like assistance in marketing finished product?

10. What workshops would you like to attend or teach?

11. Would you be interested in an association/cooperative to assist in marketing?

12. Do you know of other Alaska fiber artists who would like to be part of this conversation that we should contact? If yes, please provide their information below.

Name:

Contact Info (phone/e-mail):

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey! Please return it by e-mail or mail to:

Lee Coray-Ludden, leeaq7175@gmail.com, PO Box 254, Clam Gulch, AK 99568. Phone: (907) 394-6146



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Tundra Red

Taiga Teal

Bos Blue

Muskox Merlot

Four colors of qiviut/merino wool blend from the Robert G. White Large Animal Research Station at UAF.

—PHOTO BY JAN ROWELL