



Letter From France

Andy Spillane reports on the current developments in the French alpaca industry.

Most of us, I am sure, associate the word “prairie” with the vast plains of grass in the American mid west stretching from the Rio Grande to northern Alberta in Canada. In fact prairie is a French word applied to our natural grasslands. The grazing on these fields is ideal for alpaca with plenty of fibre and not too rich. However, just like the North American prairies, in dry summers we can lose most of our grass leaving parched soil easily eroded. We suffered just such a problem last year with consequential problems for land and livestock. Fortunately this summer we have had sufficient rain to keep everything green in this part of France.

As a result of the lessons learned from the summer of 2005, we have completely changed our breeding programme. All matings take place in spring and autumn to avoid stress to the hembras and problems of heat for the cria. This has proved effective this year and also allows us to relax during the heat of the summer after haymaking. The disruption to a year’s breeding programme was a small price to pay for a healthy herd and peace of mind. We have also found our males are more likely to successfully impregnate the female first time when mating in cooler weather.

Most farms in this part of France have large man-made lakes to provide a reserve of water in dry summers for livestock. Ours is no exception with several, the largest covering two acres. One of our neighbours, whose wells dried up last year, was very pleased to be able to access our lake for his sheep for a couple of months. With lakes, however, come Ragonda, a South American water rat similar to a coypu. These creatures breed prolifically, are a declared pest, and the local farmers assured us they caused great damage to the environment. Recently I discovered a breeding pair on our lake. After several attempts I managed to shoot one. Unfortunately the same shot took out the power supply to our well and the pipeline supplying water to our alpacas. As the locals say, “cause a lot of damage these ragonda”!

This autumn will see the first foundation course for alpaca judges being held in France. At present there are no properly qualified judges in France and, as the industry develops here, this will hamper the organising of shows and training. The two day course is being held here in the Aquitaine on our farm in mid October. Nick Harrington Smith of the Alpaca Stud has kindly agreed to come over and conduct the course despite being heavily involved with the organisation of the Futurity Show at that time. The course is being conducted in both English and French and attendees are equally split between the two nationalities. We are still going to be a couple of years away from having our own judges available but at least we are making progress.

France now hosts two shows a year and there is some talk of a third being held in the north west next year. Importing judges from abroad for each show is a heavy financial burden on small shows in an embryonic industry. Bringing in such judges is also no guarantee of quality. An American lady was wearing gloves whilst “judging” an alpaca class at last year’s autumn show at Vichy. Hence our need for good home grown judges.