

Agisting – The Farmless Way To Farm?

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Agistment, or Agisting, is a word that is not familiar to many people. Put another way, “agisting” can also be called “boarding”. Boarding is a service that farm owners can provide that allow them to care for alpacas (or any other livestock) that they do not own - for a fee. I like to think of it as “hoteling” and not boarding. When one goes to a hotel, they pay a daily rate for a room. Services included for that fee are accommodations like a clean room and running water. The same is true when one enters into an Agistment Contract with a farm owner. However, before we talk about the specific services, let’s first discuss why one would want to agist their animals in the first place. There are many good reasons to do so.



Alpaca Rich but Land Poor

Owning alpacas have a lot of advantages that people want to benefit. These benefits range from financial to the satisfaction of harvesting their own fiber to make garments. However, many people may not want to move to an environment that is conducive to raising alpacas. They also may not have the time to raise and care for alpacas. A good solution is to hotel their alpacas at a farm that can provide these types of

services.

Alpaca Transition

Starting an alpaca farm takes a certain amount of investment; both in the alpacas and in the infrastructure necessary to maintain them like fencing, gates, and pastures. A lot of that investment is time. As such, when people get into the alpaca business they want to get a return on their investment as quickly as they can. However, alpacas tend to operate at a slower pace. They only give birth and are shorn once a year. So if an alpaca owner starts out with two bred female alpacas, it may be as long as a year before they see their herd grow to four alpacas. And another year before it grows to six alpacas (remember that there is only a 50-50 chance that any offspring will be female and even if they are; it takes about two years before a female is ready to breed for the first time). So unless the new alpaca owners have a lot of funds to spend on alpacas there will be a period of time where

they will be growing their herd to “critical mass”. And by critical mass, I mean, the point where they have enough alpacas to justify spending their money on the necessary infrastructure to maintain their herd. In these instances, it might be cheaper to hotel their alpacas for the first year or two until they get to what they consider critical mass. This would allow the new owner time to get their infrastructure in place while simultaneously getting their herd a head start.

The same is true if an alpaca owner is getting out of the alpaca business. They have sold most of their herd and are left with a few alpacas waiting to be sold. They may elect to hotel their remaining alpacas at another farm in order to free themselves up for other life activities.

Those Darn Males

For some reason and maybe it is just on our farm, but female alpacas tend to play nicer with other female alpacas than male alpacas with each other. As a result, the males are sometimes banished to separate pastures where they will not do any harm to themselves or other male alpacas. The challenge, especially on smaller farms, is that pasture space could become an issue. So the question becomes where can one park these males until they are needed for breeding or until they are sold? One option could be to hotel them to another farm that has excess space.



Other Life Events

The last area is what I like to call “Other Life Events”. And that includes those short term events that would make it easier to hotel your alpacas somewhere else. For example, if you are a west coast farm but want to attend a lot of east coast shows, it may be a good idea to hotel your alpacas at a farm between shows so that they are not constantly being transported to new locations. One may have a couple of alpacas that are recovering from illness or injury and need more constant care or an alpaca that is close to giving birth and you want the process more closely monitored. The reasons can be wide and varied but the result is that there may be times when it is better to have alpacas somewhere other than on your farm for a period of time.

In each of the above examples, one may also want to consider if it matters where the host farm is located. If one is looking for a short term solution, then location may not matter as much as a long term solution. If one is looking for a long term solution, then I would recommend that they start looking close to home and expand their search as necessary. This would enable one to visit their alpacas more often.

In order to formalize an agreement between an alpaca owner and a host farm, normally an Agistment Contract is executed. The agistment contract concept is pretty simple. For a fee, you agree to hotel your alpacas at a farm. That farm, in return, will provide certain services for that fee. Sounds simple right?

The challenge is working out all of the details that this simple agreement entails. The alpaca owner must feel comfortable that their alpacas are getting the care and attention that they need at a reasonable price. The hoteling farm must feel comfortable that they are providing a quality service while not putting themselves or their farm at risk while doing so. In order to satisfy both parties, it is wise to ensure that everybody is agreeing to the same expectations. In order to achieve this, one has to understand the expectations from each others perspective.

Hoteling Farm Expectations:

I know enough about the alpaca to take reasonable care of them.

The farm owner is, in many cases, going to be taking an alpaca sight unseen. In that case they will probably request a vet health certificate and a copy of the alpaca's health records. In addition proof of "BVD free status" will usually be required to accompany the animal. Don't be surprised if you get a lot of questions about the alpaca's health and background. Have they had any health problems in the past? What about their social habits?

The information that the farm owner is thinking about: Are there any special accommodations that we will have to make for the alpacas. Are there any immediate health issues that may put the other alpacas on the farm at risk?



I have the flexibility to bring in a vet if needed.

This last year when we sheared our alpacas, one alpaca just did not enjoy the experience. As a result she bucked at the wrong time and received a gash on her leg. We called the vet to come out to stitch her up. While everyone hopes that these types of events never occur, they sometimes do. Whether it is illness or injury, the farm owner will probably require the ability to use their best judgment on when immediate action is required (which is in the best interest of your alpaca). This translates to

the fact that you may incur vet costs which you wouldn't normally expect – but better budget for.

I and my farm will be held harmless if, in spite of all reasonable care, the alpaca is injured or dies.

As sad as it may sound, despite every precaution one can take to keep alpacas safe and healthy, alpacas do die or get seriously injured. This needs to be taken into consideration when selecting a hoteling farm. Agisting Contracts will have language in them that will hold the hoteling farm harmless. Therefore, you have to feel comfortable that the farm you select will provide quality care.

I will be paid for my services in a timely manner.

Alpaca farmers that provide these services are also professional business people who have costs associated with their services. As such, they will have language in the contract that talks to how they will recover the money for their services in the event that they are not paid. It would be a good precaution to have the contract reviewed by qualified legal advice before you sign it.

Alpaca Owners Expectations:

I am taking my alpaca to a safe and knowledgeable farm.

There are many questions that should be asked before you agree to hotel your alpacas at a farm. Most of them are questions that are easily anticipated. Others may not be as apparent or easy to ask. For example, do you know the answers to these questions about a farm that you are about to entrust your alpacas:

- Has any alpaca been injured on the farm? If so, how was it cared for?
- Can you provide any references?
- What type of bio security measures do you use?
- What type of feed do you use for the alpacas?
- Do you give your own shots?
- What training does the farm have to care for alpacas?
- Is someone on the property at all times?
- What types of grasses are in the pastures?
- Describe a typical daily farm routine?
- What vet do you use and how far away are they?



There isn't any right or wrong answers to these questions but the intent is to get a good idea of the environment where the alpacas will live and how qualified the farm is to care for them.

I am receiving the services that I paid?



Since you are not at the farm, how do you know what is being done - when? That is a good question to ask. Does the farm collect each alpaca event like shots, weight, toenail trimming and document them? If so, what do they use to document events? How can you access it? When we hoteled some alpacas for a farm on the west coast, we emailed them monthly health records on all of their alpacas. It made it easier that they also used the same alpaca tracking software that we did! How will the farm

communicate to you periodic updates on your alpacas? Can you call them anytime to get an update?

The services that I am paying for are reasonable

The best way to answer this is to shop around, either by calling farms or browsing the internet. The trick is in comparing apples to apples. The daily cost is only one factor. The other factor to consider is what is included in that fee. It is best to define this upfront and define not only what is in the fee but what is NOT in the fee. This is usually the area that ends up surprising most people. *But I thought that this was included!* Below is a quick list to consider as you look at the total cost which includes the daily cost. Remember that costs that are not included in the daily fee are going to end up being charged to you at some point if needed:

- Boarding
- Feed (how much per day?)
- All shots (Which ones and how often?)
- Teeth trimming
- Toenail trimming
- Transportation to/from farm
- Assistance with labor and birthing
- Special needs rate (like bottle feeding)
- Crias nursing at side (up to 6 months)
- Crias nursing at side (older than 6 months)



There are no surprises

The total hoteling cost has to be understood in order for the alpaca owner to make an informed decision. In addition, the level of care has to be agreed upon and understood.

Once each party is comfortable with these questions and more importantly, the answers, they can assess whether they are a good match for each other. Because when you get down to the truth of the matter, the alpaca owner is entrusting their investment to another farm for a period of time. The alpaca owner shouldn't feel obligated to commit to a single farm either. Some farms may be better suited for some types of hoteling than others. Some better for short term care than long term as an example. The alpaca owner should shop around before the need is there and should keep hoteling the back of their mind when they visit other alpaca farms. The question that they should always be asking is, "Could I see my alpacas staying here?" If the answer is yes, then talk about it with the farm owner. Starting the dialog early ensures that you will have all of the answers before the need arises.

Lastly, one should realize that an Agistment Contract is a legal document and should be treated as such. It outlines terms, liability, and conditions. The language should be clear and direct. Therefore, it is a good idea to get sound legal advice before it is signed.

So with all of that said, is "Hoteling" the right choice for you?

About the Authors:

Renee and Barry Prokop have created and developed Black Meadow Suris to provide a diverse collection of suri alpacas. We have a passion for quality customer service and friendliness. Come experience the power that a small dedicated farm can bring to your breeding program! Services that we provide include long and short term agisting, breeding services, and alpaca sales. We also are opening two stores; one online and the other at the farm. Renee and Barry operate Black Meadow Suris just outside of Fredericksburg, Virginia. Fredericksburg is located in the rolling hills just below the falls of the Rappahannock River and halfway between the two Civil War capitals, Washington, D.C. and Richmond, VA. Barry has published many articles about alpaca farming in American Livestock Magazine, Small Farm Today, and the New Zealand Lifestyle Farmer Magazine.



Renee, who is no stranger to the farm, manages the day-to-day operations of Black Meadow Suris. Both Barry and Renee will continue to explore, learn, and communicate better ways that they have found to manage their growing farm.

To find out more about Black Meadow Suris, call us at 703-764-9077; email us at Renee@prokops.com or visit us on the web at www.blackmeadowfarm.com

