

# Goat Note

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## Australian Cashmere in Perspective - An Industry Overview

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The outlook for cashmere production in Australia is excellent. The animals, the land, the husbandry and the technology are all readily available.

The cashmere industry in its present stage of growth is akin to the sheep industry, in Australia, in the days of John Macarthur. The Macarthurs and other sheep breeders started with mixed sheep populations, cutting very little wool and from them developed the modern Australian wool growing sheep. Today's cashmere breeders are aiming to do the same based on the Australian feral goat and its domestic contemporaries.

### What is Cashmere?

Cashmere is the fine soft downy winter undercoat found on most goats that do not grow mohair. This undercoat that grows as the day length shortens is associated with an outercoat of coarse hair, which is present all the year and is called Guard Hair. The cashmere goat is not yet a breed. Most common goat breeds, including dairy goats, grow this two coated fleece. A goat which grows this fine undercoat of the correct quality and in sufficient quantities to be commercial is called a cashmere goat.

The mixture of hair and down is dehaired to produce the final down product, using specialised processing machinery.

Cashmere is one of the finest commercial animal fibres. It is soft, warm, light and luxurious. It is used to make some of the most expensive garments in the world.

The name "cashmere" is derived from the area Kashmir, near India. The fibre has been traditionally produced in China, Mongolia, Iran, Afghanistan and India. In these countries cashmere fibre is often a secondary consideration to the goats primary function of producing meat and milk.

### World Production

World Production is about 8,000 tonnes annually of hair-in product from which the worlds' cashmere processors extract around 3,600 tonnes of down. About half of this is produced in China and the Chinese Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia. Around 850 tonnes of down are produced annually by Iran and Afghanistan and 700 tonnes by the Republic of Mongolia.

Australia and New Zealand between them produced just on 45 tonnes of down in 1989.

### History

Goats came to Australia with the First Fleet. It has even been suggested, although there is no documentary evidence, that goats were liberated on the islands off the coast of Australia by Dutch and Portuguese navigators long before the British settlement of Australia. The introduced goats would appear to have come from a great variety of backgrounds and they accommodated readily to the Australian environment. Most pre- 1830 prints of early Australia show the animals on the hills in the background as goats.

Some early efforts were made to develop a fleece goat industry in Australia. William Riley, in 1832 imported "Angora-Cachemire" animals to increase the quality and quantity of down fibre growing on previously imported goats. In that year he delivered a paper to the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of New South Wales in an effort to encourage the development of a cashmere/angora fleece industry in Australia. It took a further 150 years for Australian graziers to develop some of his concepts. An advertisement also appeared in 1832 in the Western Australia publication "Colonial Paper" for young half-bred Cashmere bucks offered for sale at 3 pounds each by W. Tanner of Caversham.

It is likely that the gold rush period brought the demise of the infant goat industry. Prior to the gold rush, flocks of grazing animals, goats and sheep were controlled by shepherds. Most abandoned their charges in favour of making their fortune on the gold fields. The landowners then had to make some attempt at fencing their runs. Rudimentary fences could be erected to control sheep, which on large runs without fences would keep to the open plains. The goats were not controlled by fences and actively sought the rougher country as their grazing environment. Thus forming the large herds of wild (or feral) goats that became well established in much of inland Australia. Eventually the spread of settlement pushed these herds back into the semi arid sparsely settled areas of the country.

Other introductions occurred in Australia in the 1800's. Wilson (1873) records that Dr. Chalmers imported 49 cashmere goats through Melbourne in 1863 from Chinese Tartery. At this time Wilson was running his own flock of Cashmere goats at Longerenong in Western Victoria. These were descendants of one male and two females imported from India.



Through the intervening years history records many references to goats in Australia. In 1879 herds of goats roaming the streets of Sydney created such a nuisance that police action was required to get them away. Goat racing in which goats were driven by youths in light gigs became very popular at the end of the century, particularly in Queensland. The famous opera singer, Dame Nellie Melba, was so taken with the spectacle at Rockhampton, Queensland, that she arranged for the running of the Melba Derby.

### **Cashmere Rediscovered**

Cashmere was effectively rediscovered on Australian goats in 1972 when two CSIRO researchers Dr. Ian Smith and Mr. Wal Clarke identified cashmere on some feral goats under inspection at the property of The Australian Mohair Company at Brewarrina. For a number of years the CSIRO maintained a small research herd of selected animals at their Prospect laboratory until budget restraints forced their dispersal. Some important early histological work was carried out during this period.

By the late 1970's a number of breeders were toying with the concept of developing and breeding an Australian cashmere goat. Much of this early breeding was hampered by a lack of knowledge of the problems involved and by lack of a market.

Interest and morale were given a major boost when in August 1980 Dawson International Limited PLC, Scotland; the worlds largest cashmere processors purchased a property at Adelong, N.S.W. with the view to setting up a demonstration farm to encourage Australian cashmere production. The chairman of Dawson International Limited, Sir Alan Smith, saw the world cashmere supply situation tightening. Although cashmere represented only a small percentage of the volume of fibre handled by the company, it accounted for 50% of the turnover and was a major contributor to company profitability.

### **Growers Unite**

As interest in cashmere production developed, the idea of a producer body to catalyze development and pool knowledge was put forward by those people who had been involved in the CSIRO project. In December 1978, a meeting at Bundanoon, New South Wales, agreed to form a grower group, which they called The Australian Cashmere Goat Society. Geographical isolation caused the formation of a number of other groups. Eventually all amalgamated to form The Australian Cashmere Growers Association.

The Australian Cashmere Growers Association is now the grower-owned controlling organisation for the cashmere industry. It plays a major role in setting directions, and markets most of the Australian clip. The ACGA has developed through a number of stages:

- \* The unification of various grass roots organisations that emerged with the growing industry into one national body.

- \* The creation of a programme to collect and collate

technical information from all sources and relay this information to the grower.

- \* The development of standards for the industry.

- \* The coordination of product sales and the establishment of research and promotion levies.

- \* The investigation of potential markets.

- \* The introduction of marketing contracts and product development.

### **Fibre Marketing**

The early days of the industry were hampered by a lack of market. To stimulate industry development Dawsons offered to purchase all Australian Cashmere and in December 1980 the Victorian Cashmere Group organised the first pool sale to Dawsons of 50kg of cashmere.

Dawsons set up fleece testing facilities at their Adelong property and offered to purchase any growers fleece on the basis of objective measurement. This service operated between May 1981 and March 1986. From January 1983 Filati Biagioli Modesto S.P.A. of Italy also offered a buying service based on AWTA test results.

The Australian Cashmere Marketing Corporation (ACMC) is the marketing arm of the AGGA. It began life in 1985 as a small lots pool, a service to small growers. In March 1986 it took over the responsibility for classing and selling the entire Australian cashmere clip. Dawson and Biagioli agreed to buy all Australian cashmere through the ACMC and they were joined by a third processor, the Forte Cashmere Company Inc. of USA. Since then, the bulk of Australian cashmere has been sold by the ACMC.

### **Cashmere Production**

Production from Australian Cashmere goats varies widely, depending upon the degree to which stocks have been bred-on from the initial feral foundation herds. Selected feral goats produced around 70 grammes of cashmere down per year under farmed conditions, whilst now, well bred animals can produce in excess of 500 grammes for the better types.

Breeders should aim at a large framed, upstanding animal, with good constitution, good reproductive ability and a good milk supply. This animal should grow as much cashmere down as possible, with fibre evenly distributed and of similar type. For maximum financial return the fleece should be of a uniform colour and length. Fine white fleece, between 35 and 100 mm, currently attracts the highest price.

The characteristics of the animals' fleece are important. There must be a well defined diameter difference between guard hair and down. This is readily obvious to the eye. Fine guard hair intermingled with coarse down makes the dehairing process very difficult. There are a variety of fibre types that grow in the same diameter range as cashmere. It is important for the breeder to learn to recognise and select for true "cashmere style" fibre.



Guard hair length may vary from short to long and shaggy. Where goats are to be run in scrub paddocks, selection for longer guard hair to protect the cashmere is desirable.

### **Foundation Females.**

Choice of foundation animals will depend upon personal preference and availability.

Bred-on animals may be purchased, or you may choose to start from the beginning. Most early breeders started from the feral base. They overcame the problems involved and carried the losses. Nowadays bred-on goats from established breeders will be the most economic starting point.

Beware of comparing test results between herds without assessing the nutritional background of the animals. Extra feed produces extra cashmere! Due to the high sexual activity and strong social codes in the buck mobs, animals generally do better and grow more cashmere in smaller mobs. Allow for this in your assessments.

### **Selecting Sires**

One or more bucks should be purchased or leased. They should be selected with the aim of complementing the chosen females' fleece characteristics.

Only bucks with full fleece test results for diameter and down weight should be selected for cashmere production. Note that most animals increase in down fibre diameter with age, in some cases dramatically. Fleece test results should always indicate the age at which the animal was tested, and test results for more than one year should be used, if available.

### **Breeding**

Refer to Goat Note E 6 entitled "Breeding Cashmere in Australian Goats".

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Left to Right: Sir Alan Smith, Dawson International PLC; Tom Ross, Animal Fibres Ltd.  
Geoff Smith, Dawson International PLC;

Richard Forts, Forte Cashmere Company; Giovanni Nesti, AGESCO sr.l.; Jim Browne, A.C.G.A.

An historic meeting took place in March 1985 at which representatives of the A.C.G.A., Dawson International PLC (U.K.), Forte Cashmere Company (U.S.A.), and Filati Biagioli Modesto (Italy), discussed the development of a marketing structure for the Australian cashmere industry.