

# REGULATIONS FOR SPECIFIC PRODUCTS

## SELLING FIBER AND WOOL PRODUCTS



Wooled sheep, Angora goats, and cashmere goats offer fiber and the opportunity for another enterprise for producers, in addition to meat or milk. Yaks, angora rabbits, llamas, and alpacas are also valued for their fiber. Washington's climates are well suited for animal fiber production, and it is an under-utilized value-added enterprise. This fact sheet offers small and medium size flock owners an overview of considerations for selling many types of animal fiber.

### This factsheet includes information on:

- Introduction to selling fiber and wool products.
- Selling raw wool.
- Shearing, classing, and pricing.
- Selling value-added fiber.
- Additional resources.

### Introduction to Selling Fiber and Wool Products

There are no specific permits or licenses required for marketing wool products in Washington State. There are considerations that can help producers build customers, improve sales, and get the best prices. There are two primary markets for wool: the commodity market, available to producers who shear a large number of animals or pool their fleeces, and the niche market for smaller-scale and rare-breed producers. According to the USDA, growth in the industry for both meat and fiber production from multi-use animals will rely on smaller operations scaling-up and continuing to introduce more customers to the industry, while at the same time tapping into local niche markets for meat, fiber, and dairy products.

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Note: While there are no regulations specific to fiber sales in Washington, for tax purposes, all records of sale must be kept by the producer for each fleece or lot of wool, and producers must have their appropriate business license. See fact sheets on "Licenses" and "Taxes".

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### Selling Raw Wool

Determining the right niche market for your product begins with understanding the customer, including what they value when seeking wool fibers. Fiber producers can connect with core customers for raw and heritage breed wool at annual wool markets, "wool shows" at regional fairs, seasonal fiber festivals such as the Lopez Lamb, Wool and Goat Festival, and weekly farmers markets.

Customers for local wools may be hand spinners, yarn shop owners, or fiber enthusiasts who value the opportunity to feel the fiber and talk to the producer in person. They will often choose a clean, whole fleece by their assessment of the breed, history of the animal, philosophy of the farmer, and their sense of the quality of the fiber. The extra time put into the blanketing and skirting for a clean fleece is valuable, and will affect pricing. These direct markets are also great outlets for reaching customers who value raw fiber to make their own "one-of-a-kind" items, or who are interested in fibers that have been mill-processed into yarn, batts, or other value-added products like rugs, socks or scarves.

Baled, raw fleeces may also be sold via a wool pool, a collaboration among different small-flock producers, so they can do the further sorting, grading, and marketing for a better price. Typically, the minimum amount for selling to a wool pool is 200 pounds. The fibers are bundled and presented for sale in a clean plastic bag or a box. Find a wool pool at [sheepusa.org](http://sheepusa.org). Search for "Wool Pools" and "Washington."

Similarly, producers with larger uniform flocks may work with a wool pool, or work in advance to sell their "whole clip" to commercial milling operations such as Pendleton Woolen Mills, or other western region mills seeking wool for blankets or mattresses; or, in the case of Merino or other premium grade wools, to find a fine yarn or knitwear designer to buy the fiber.

## Shearing, Classing and Pricing

### Shearing

Preparing to market fiber begins with the sheep shearer, who is responsible for some of the product attributes. A good shearer:

- Sanitizes shoes, blades and equipment between farms.
- Handles the animals humanely and avoids cutting.
- Avoids second cuts.

The Washington Sheep Producers Association keeps a calendar of shearing trainings at [wssp.org](http://wssp.org). Find a certified sheep shearer in Washington at [sheepusa.org](http://sheepusa.org).

### Classing

The grade of a wool also impacts marketing options. Usually hired to be on-hand during the shearing, a wool classer examines the characteristics of wool in its raw state, looking for specific qualities and assigning a grade value. The qualities considered in grading include:

- Breed of the animal, which has a bearing on the diameter (fineness) and value of the fibers.
- Adherence to the rules regarding use of chemicals.
- Removal of the parts of the fleece that come from the jowls, shanks and brands.
- Stains – that wool must be removed and is identified separately.
- Spinning capacity, measured by the bends per unit length (crimps per inch) and along the fiber, and the diameter (measured in microns).
- Strength is determined for the ability to withstand processing (weaker wool produces more waste in carding and spinning).
- Natural color, impurities, and/or stains.

The classing grade will influence the value of the fleece, and depending on the market outlet, may be the main process for setting the price.

### Pricing

Commodity product is priced by the grade and per pound for wool and pelts. Supreme and premium graded pelts range around one-third to double the per pound price for wool. Prices in the specialty and direct markets vary depending on the breed, type of fiber, extent of value-added processing, blanketing, skilled skirting, and the method of sale.

Prices for different types of fiber vary. In both the specialty and commodity market, fiber from angora or cashmere goats can earn more, sometimes up to five times the price of standard sheep wool.

The desirable qualities in a specialty market can be different than for a commercial market. In the specialty market, value of the wool is often based on the personal assessment of the direct market customer who considers the feel of the fiber in the hand, the color, and the story of the animal breed and the farm—all of which may add value and be reflected in price.

Higher prices may also be available through participation in voluntary third-party certifications, such as the Textile Exchange Responsible Wool Standard, [responsiblewool.org](http://responsiblewool.org), which was developed to provide the industry with a tool to recognize the best practices of farmers, ensuring that wool comes from farms with a progressive approach to managing their land and from sheep that have been treated responsibly.

Social media and e-commerce sites like Etsy can also be useful direct marketing tools for selling both raw wool and value-added wool products. These tools allow ranchers to share the story of their farm and their animals with customers who develop a sense of connection and may become loyal customers. With strong social media followings and a robust customer list, some producers pre-sell fleeces before shearing.

### Selling value-added fiber

Value-added fiber has been washed, carded, spun into yarn, or made into a final product. Any one of these steps adds value. For some specialty fibers, processing this way can add four-to-six times the price per pound.

For producers with smaller quantities of fiber to sell or process, a custom carding operation or mill can help small-scale ranchers add value to their fleeces with scouring, tumbling, picking, carding, pin drafting, blending, spinning and/or carded batts. A cottage

mill may also offer value-added services and make finished items such as socks, hats, scarves, toys, woven rugs, or blankets.

Small fiber producers may also take advantage of commercial-scale dehairing services that separate coarse primary fibers from the soft undercoat of dual-coated animals. For example, Natural Fiber Producers, a national co-operative, will dehair fleece from llama, alpaca, cashmere, qiviut, yak, and bison/buffalo and separate it into several grades of fiber suitable for different uses. This service makes it possible for producers to have an additional revenue stream for fleece they may otherwise discard.

Cottage milling fees are usually based on incoming weight and the amount of sorting needed. The mill will prepare fibers by removing vegetation, manure, second cuts, and inconsistent fiber. There are a handful of cottage mills, carders, and other value-added processing services around the state. Look for mills with the right kind of machinery for your needs and those that are transparent about the type of processing chemicals used. Find one local to you by doing an internet search for “Wool Fiber Mill,” or “Custom Carding.” Some mills also offer retail sales by consignment.

Some fiber producers contract with a custom manufacturer to “private label,” which involves developing a product idea for the producer’s fibers and manufacturing the product, like socks or scarves. The mill may pool the fiber from many producers to make the item. The farmer’s label is put on the end product, and then the farmer either consigns or buys it back to sell themselves.

## Additional Resources

- Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, [agmrc.org](http://agmrc.org), has many resources for fiber producers organized by livestock type.
- Washington State Sheep Producers, [wssp.org](http://wssp.org), hosts events and trainings..
- Alpaca Association of Western Washington, [alpacawa.org](http://alpacawa.org).
- Pacific Northwest Alpaca Association, [pnaa.org](http://pnaa.org).
- “Modern Wool Podcast” from the Abundant Earth Fiber mill on Whidbey Island [abundantearthfiber.com](http://abundantearthfiber.com).
- Tahoma Vista Fiber Mill in Yelm, Washington [tahomavistafibermill.com](http://tahomavistafibermill.com)
- Fiber Fusion Northwest annual event focused on local natural fibers and fiber arts with vendors and workshops [fiberfusion.net](http://fiberfusion.net)
- Twisted Strait Fiber Co-op, [twistedstraitfibers.com](http://twistedstraitfibers.com), is building a cooperative producer-owned processing mill on the Olympic Peninsula.
- Natural Fiber Producers, [NaturalFiberProducers.com](http://NaturalFiberProducers.com).



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