

Sheep Covers

An Ancient Secret To Futuristic Profits

By Tim King



Notice the difference in the color of wool above the part, creamy white. Note vegetable matter below cover protection (belly wool). Tips of belly wool (at bottom of the part) unprotected - at least an inch or more of gray wool significantly dirtier than above. Straw and hay hang from wool below the cover line; there would be just as much of this higher up if not for the cover. Fiber lock-structure is preserved (easier to process); no weathered tips to break off as "noils" in processing; sheep stay drier longer. The sheep covers dry quickly and breathe; also offer some protection against fly strike.

Shepherds looking for a way to increase the value of their flocks' wool can accomplish that by covering their sheep. Robin Nistock, who has been covering her sheep for over a decade, finds sheep covers indispensable.

Cover Stories...

"I sell all my wool to fiber artists—spinners, felters and others," boasts Robin, who raises Cotswold sheep in New York. "I've worked really hard to breed sheep with the best fleeces possible. Because of our climate we feed hay six months of the year and use barn housing in winter. Under those circumstances an uncovered fleece would be really trashy even with care taken at feeding time. Coating the fleeces

assures that I'll be able to ask the best price these fleeces could generate."

Nistock uses sheep covers from Rocky Sheep Suit Company in Loveland, Colorado. Former shepherd Rocky Payne owns the company. Payne and his former wife bought their first sheep from a sheep operation that had been covering its sheep. They continued the practice.

"We fed alfalfa all year so we covered our sheep all year," Rocky said. "In February we took the covers off, sheared them and put a smaller cover back on, and they'd go back into the pen."

Payne sold his wool to hand spinners and crafters for around \$12 per pound. The wool from his sheep was—like Nistock's—in demand because it was clean.

"When we had sheep, all of our wool was sold on shearing day and we reserved about 50% of the next year's clip at that time," he said.

Sheep covers keep vegetable matter out of the fleece and most hand spinners wash their own wool, according to Rocky.

"It's about impossible to remove vegetable matter by hand," he said. "In a commercial operation it's not so much of a problem because they probably carbonize the vegetable matter with a mild acid."



Too small (wool bulging, cover tight).



Too Large (straps hang below hock, cover hangs unevenly).

The primary reason covers bring high prices for fleeces is the absence of vegetable matter. There are secondary reasons such as the absence of sun bleaching on colored breeds. Covers also can improve sheep comfort by serving as a windbreaker, although they don't eliminate the need for shelter. But increased profit is the main motivation to use them.

Ewe Pays Cover-Charges

"The dollar-per-pound price I can get for a covered fleece is enough more than I could ask for an uncovered fleece so that a new cover often pays for itself the first year," Nistock said. "Of course, each sheep needs multiple covers of different sizes each year, so the positive increase is spread over them all. But once they've paid for themselves it's all profit."

Sheep on pasture generally don't need a cover. Sheep being fed hay, even if they are on pasture, should be covered if you are seeking the quality fleeces that Nistock's customers are looking for.

Rocky Payne fed all year so he had a set of four covers for each animal he wanted to cover.

"On our place a mature ewe went through four consecutive sizes during a year," Rocky said. "For instance, a shorn ewe would go into a 30-inch cover and progress up to a 37-inch cover when she was in full fleece," he said. "We changed the size approximately every three months. We sort of made a day of it. We wormed, trimmed feet, looked at the wool, and changed covers."

"I had a 21 inch cover and that fit my lambs when they were three weeks old," he said. "I'd cover lambs based on genetics. If mom had a great fleece I'd cover her lamb. Lamb covers last forever because they don't get a lot of wear. Once the lamb cover started to get a little tight I'd take it off and look at the wool. If it looked good I'd put a larger cover on them. If it didn't look good they didn't get another cover."

"A mature ewe that is covered all year will have between \$66.00 and \$70.00 in covers," Rocky said.

...Till Her Cover Is Blown

Rocky Sheep Suits come in two types of fabrics. There is a heavy nylon suit made from the material used in tough backpacks and other durable out door products.



Too large and loose.



Good and snug; not too tight.

Payne says that suits from that material will last from four to six years although he had a customer recently whose suits lasted eight years. Assuming a four to six year life cycle the annual investment ranges from \$11 to \$17, according to Rocky. With wool at \$12 to \$15 per pound they nicely pay for themselves.

Robin Nistock says that Rocky's estimate for the lifespan of his Sheep Suits is conservative.

"Seven years is probably about average and older than that is certainly possible," she said. "Part of the reason is that no one coat is worn all year. Some do need minor repair each year—a seam here, a 3-corner tear there—but with care I don't really see an end to their useful life. The fabric is very durable and the lighter weight fabric for fine wool animals is amazingly tough. They wash and dry well."

Rocky Sheep Suits Company has covers for breeds that have fine wool such as Merino, Rambouillet or Cormo. The regular covers are made from 1000 denier nylon threads. Those are big coarse threads.

"I searched around and found this 400 denier nylon which is two and a half times lighter than the 1000 denier nylon," Rocky said. "It doesn't last as long but it does a good job covering those fine wool sheep. It has a very slick silky feel to it. It doesn't seem to catch on anything. When I got my first sample I thought it was too light. I dragged it over hog panels, nails, and barbed wire and it's so slick it didn't seem to get caught on those things."

Adequate Coverage

Rocky says he's convinced covers work, even on breeds that felt easily such as Finn and Blue Face Leicester. He has designed a cover for horned breeds too, that opens in front and is fastened with Velcro®.

Whatever breed you have, you'll need to measure your sheep to determine what size they need. Price is determined by size.

"For sizing, length is the only number that matters," Rocky said. "I'm going to take girth off my web site because the girth automatically increases with the length."

"I recommend using a cloth tape measure: From the base of the neck lay the tape over the surface of the wool. You're measuring the volume of the animal, not necessarily the animal itself. The length is measured from the base of the neck just in front of the shoulders to the dock."



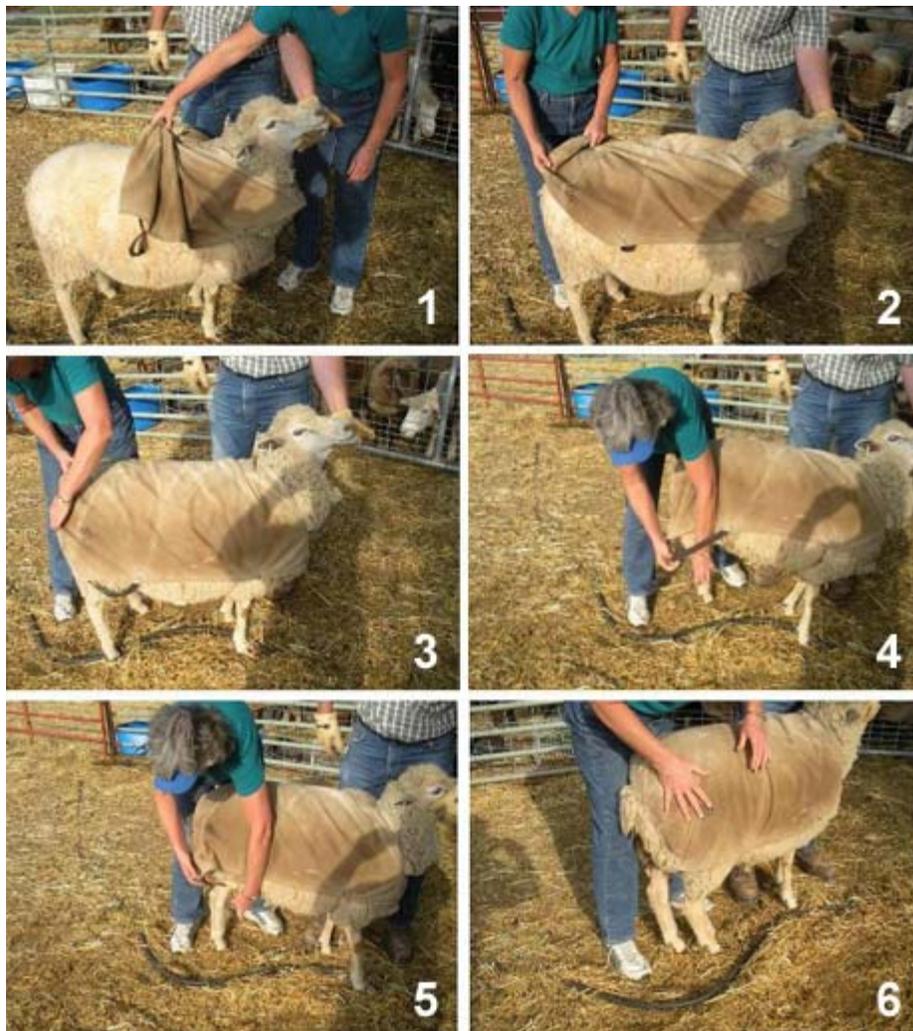
Cloth sewing tape is the best and easiest for measuring: Metal tape noise and stiffness worry sheep. Start at neck's base. Push the tape into the wool to meet the neck. Rest tape lightly atop the wool (we're trying to cover wool volume. Measure to the wool end, not just to the dock. Always round UP to the next size. Covers too small may cause felting. Covers too large (within reason) can be made smaller by using a basting stitch to make a seam down the back, raising leg straps above the sheep's hock.

Covering Your Market

A shepherd that decides to improve fleece quality should have a marketing plan. The plan will likely require some market research as well some business relationship-building.

"If you're going to sell to hand spinners, become familiar with what their needs are," Rocky said. "We went to wool and sheep shows. We met hand spinners there and also people looking for good lambs. You can also get tips from organizations such as the Natural Colored Wool Growers Association."

Rocky also suggests doing an internet search for hand spinning blogs or discussion groups, as well as making visits to wool and yarn shops. These venues will give you an opportunity to learn from people who value top quality wool as well as to promote your fleeces.



FITTING THE COVER: This works best with two, but can be done alone. 1. Put sheep's head through the head hole. 2. Pull it across the back. 3. Pull it down across the chest to fit around the neck. Pull down around the rump, pulling leg corners towards rear. 4. Hold leg strap out with one hand; reach through opening and grab sheep's leg. 5. Pull sheep's leg up through strap, using the other hand to make sure strap clears the hock as its leg comes through. The lower the sheep's leg while you do this, the less struggling. 6. All done.

To be sure your covered fleeces remain high quality make sure your shearer is well qualified and avoids second cuts as much as possible. Rocky recommends doing a rough skirt at shearing and later putting the fleece out on a table in the sun to dry for an hour or two. At that time you can skirt it more thoroughly.

"Don't sell wool that can't be spun," he advises.

After the fleece is fully skirted and dried put it in a plastic garbage bag but don't close the top.

"Let it breathe," Rocky said.

To learn more about Rocky Sheep Suits visit www.sheepcover.com or call (970) 622-9965. To learn more about Robin Nistock's Cotswolds, and her various lamb and wool enterprises visit Nistock Farms website at www.nistockfarms.com.

Photos were taken at Robin & Mark Phillips' Sheep Feathers Farm in Lafayette, CO They keep CVM, Corriedale & Cotswold crosses developed for hand spinning wool quality and colors. Sheep related products for sale: Covered hand spinning fleece, Roving, Lambs & Pelts. E-mail: robinphillips3@gmail.com