

# ALPACANOMICS

By Lark L. Burnham, Ph.D. | Ruminant nutrition

*About the Author:*

Lark Burnham received a B.S. in Animal Science (1979) from Kansas State University and an M.S. in non-ruminant nutrition (1995) from Kansas State University, Manhattan, and a Ph.D. Doctorate in ruminant nutrition (2004) from Texas Tech University, Lubbock. Her special interests are comparative nutrition, the role of the micro flora in all mammals, fiber digestion, and probiotics. Lark currently works for Natur's Way, Inc., Horton, KS which produces MSE probiotics.



The last five years have been very hard on Americans, including alpaca producers. Many have had to dig deep into their financial bag of tricks to stay in business. Just when the economy seems to be improving, drought is spreading and the outlook for moisture is bleak. Feed and forage prices have skyrocketed and may go even higher. Some of a producer's biggest expenses are a) feed and forage and b) veterinary care. This article discusses ways to minimize both.

#### Feed and forage

Although buying and feeding bagged pellets labeled for alpacas may seem easy, it can also be very expensive. Take a look at the DIY (do-it-yourself) alpaca feeding system ([natures-way.com/livestock\\_articles/AM%20HER12%20Burnham.pdf](http://natures-way.com/livestock_articles/AM%20HER12%20Burnham.pdf)), originally published in Alpacas Magazine. Methods suggested in this article include:

- Use of mineral mixes intended for all livestock found locally
- Reserving protein/energy supplements for lactating females and any animals that are underweight
- Easy-to-follow instructions for formulating and even mixing your own protein/energy supplements
- Preventive use of probiotics. Often, the first things that are cut when tightening the financial belt are supplements. Probiotics actually improve the bottom line by keeping animals healthy and reducing feed costs.

Many producers have already made the move away from pre-bagged minerals and protein/energy supplements marketed for alpacas. Although the steps outlined in the

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article work synergistically, they can also be used separately. This transition does not have to be scary or based on trial and error. Alpaca producers can take control of what their animals eat, and save significant amounts of money in the process.

### Prevention, prevention, prevention

Although a good vet is worth their weight in gold, we'd rather not need them if we can help it. You know the adage, 'prevention is cheaper than treatment'? Well, make it your mantra. Stress is your number one boogeyman, anticipate it wherever it may raise its ugly head. Major stresses that require special attention:

- Birth
- Weaning
- Shearing
- Moving (both within the farm and to a new one)
- Transportation (the more time spent in a trailer, the bigger the impact)

- Showing
- Change of diet
- Fluctuations in temperature, especially sudden changes, up or down, and those that are unseasonable.

As discussed in the article on the DIY system, concentrated probiotics offer the best protection against these kinds of stresses. Treat before and after if the stress can be anticipated. The animal will endure the stress better with a strong immune system. This means they are better able to resist proliferation of pathogens, both those found in the environment or already inside the animal. Otherwise, make sure they get concentrated probiotics as soon as possible to minimize the damage.

Put your fatties on a strict diet. Not only do they waste expensive food, they have more health problems and are often unproductive.

Quarantine after a show or when a new animal comes to the farm. Those that have endured several hours or even days in a trailer may be so stressed, they

can't tolerate quarantine. They may pace continuously and refuse feed. Sometimes the only way to get them to calm down is to put them in with other alpacas. Keep this group sequestered for at least two weeks to a month. Even though the animals already on the farm appear healthy, they carry pathogens that are unfamiliar to the new animal's immune system.

More radical suggestions involve foot baths in all buildings or a clothing change when going from a barn or pen that contains quarantined animals. Feed them last to avoid potential disease transmission. If possible, keep alpacas segregated at shows and bring your own feed and forage. Avoid physical contact with unfamiliar animals.

Options are available to reduce the cost of feed and veterinary services. If you have the leisure of time, learn and experiment at your own pace and gain confidence in your abilities.



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