

The Wool Story

The Wool Industry

Today there are more than a billion sheep in the world, yielding nearly 6 billion pounds of wool each year.

In the U.S.A. there are about 9 million sheep, concentrated largely in the western states, however, there are some sheep in every state.

Australia ranks first in the world in wool production, followed by the Soviet countries, New Zealand and Argentina. The United States ranks about 15th.

Wool is sheared usually once a year from each animal. Most ewes are sheared between February and June. Sheep producers try to shear just before the weather begins to warm in their parts of the country. An average of 8.5 pounds of wool is shorn from one sheep.

After the fleece is shorn, it is packed in a huge bag which holds about 200-250 pounds of wool. Each bag contains the production of about 35 sheep.

The United States grows only about 40 percent of the wool the manufacturers use in this country. We import the rest.

Although there are about 200 different breeds of sheep in the world, only a dozen are important breeds in the U.S. Here selective breeding has eliminated the majority of very long, coarse wools used in carpet manufacturing. Carpet wools are imported from New Zealand, Argentina, India and Pakistan. Mainly apparel wool is produced in the U.S.

The U.S. ranks second behind the United Kingdom in wool manufacturing but we use more wool than any other nation in the world.

The greatest threat to wool production in the U.S. is the coyote. In the western states, coyotes kill an average of 10 percent of the lambs each year. Large areas of Texas and other states that used to produce sheep no longer do because of the coyote population there now. However, many of these areas are being

repopulated today due to the guard dogs that have virtually saved the sheep industry in many areas of the U.S.

Classes of Sheep

Sheep are classified by the type wool produced. The classes are fine wool, medium wool, long wool, crossbred wool, carpet wool and hair sheep.

Oklahoma produces mostly medium wool sheep. Breeds produced in Oklahoma include Dorset, Hampshire, Montadale, Shropshire, Southdown and Suffolk. These breeds are produced mainly for meat, but their wool is also used in the clothing market. The majority of the commercial ewe flocks consist of Rambouillet and Rambouillet Dorset crosses. These ewe breeds are noted for all lambing which commercial producers utilize in Oklahoma due to wheat pasture availability.

Classes of Wool

Wool is classified as apparel wool and carpet wool. Apparel wool is used in yarns and fabrics (clothing). Carpet wool is used in floor covering.

Apparel wool is then categorized three ways:

1. Combing and staple wool – longest fibered wools, and more expensive.
2. French Combing wool – the medium length fibers.
3. Clothing Wool – the shortest length fibers, and least expensive.

At the Mill

Wool is sorted and blended according to fiber diameter. The fineness will determine to a large extent what will be made from the wool.

Next the wool is scoured or washed to remove all the grease, dirt and impurities.

Carding or combing untangles the fibers and arranges them in a parallel direction. After carding, the web of wool goes into either woolen or worsted manufacture. Woolen fabrics are made from the shorter fibers which produce a looser weave. Worsted fabrics are made from longer fibers that produce a tighter wave and smooth surface.

Spinning is the process that draws and twists the wool into yarn.

Finally the yarn is woven or knitted into fabrics.

Dyeing wool may be done at any stage in the process of manufacture – after it has been washed, after spinning, or after weaving or knitting.

Facts about Wool fabric

Wool is resilient – the fibers have “stretch” which makes the fabric resistant to wrinkling. Wool is wear-resistant; the fibers are strong and stretch easily without breaking. A wool garment well cared for will last several years.

Wool is light weight. Even the warmest wool fabrics are not too heavy.

Wool has excellent insulation properties. Low temperatures, snow, rain and cold wind are slow to penetrate the fabric. Wool is warm in the winter and cool in the summer because of its ability to absorb moisture.

Also, because of wool’s absorbency, it is static-resistant, less likely to “spark” or cling to the body, and less likely to attract lint and dirt. It is resistant to mildew.

Wool is versatile – it can be made into sheer lacy knits and light, airy worsted prints or bulky tweeds and heavy over coating.

Recent developments in manufacturing have given us wool that is moth proof, shrink proof and machine washable.

For best results, however, wool should be cared for according to the manufacturer's label. Most fine wools should be dry cleaned only or washed by hand.