

New Ways with Wool

U.S. Wool Industry Future Tied to Organics

by ANDREA WATTS

With the proliferation of farmers' markets and public support for CSA programs throughout the United States, farmers have multiple avenues for their produce to reach consumers. While society recognizes the value of organic, sustainable farming, not all consumers yet recognize the chemical-free benefits that wool can bring to their lives, and this directly impacts the ability of sheep farmers to make a living. Through the efforts of Woolgatherer Carding Mill and Holy Lamb Organics, these businesses are helping to create the markets to revitalize the U.S. wool industry.

WOOLGATHERER CARDING MILL

A conviction that the U.S. wool industry had a future, when all signs suggested otherwise, motivated Patrick Holland to assemble the Woolgatherer Carding Mill 15 years ago. And his conviction has borne fruit; with consumers across the United States desiring a chemical-free bedroom, companies such as Shepherd's Dream and Holy Lamb Organics are fulfilling a demand for wool mattresses and bedding with Woolgatherer



Organic wool processed at the Woolgatherer Carding Mill.



Wool batting produced at the Woolgatherer Carding Mill in Montague, California.

er Carding Mill's high-quality wool batting filling their products.

"I think that we're all becoming more natural in our lives ... you spend more time in bed than you probably do at work, and you want to make sure what you're sleeping on is comfortable," said Tom Moore, Woolgatherer Carding Mill's general manager. He joined the mill as a consultant in 2012, working part-time until being brought on full-time in December 2013. During his tenure at the mill, Moore has seen an uptick in production which he describes as being two-fold: more wool manufacturers entering the market and an increased desire for wool products. Wool has many desirable naturally occurring properties (including being water-resistant, temperature regulating and naturally flame retardant) that require chemicals to duplicate in other materials.

This increased desire for wool products didn't exist when Holland searched for a buyer of his wool more than 20 years ago. As a shepherd in Shasta Valley, he desired a living raising sheep, but unfortunately the market wasn't there. Meeting Eliana Jantz, founder and owner of Shepherd's Dream, gave him hope that a market could exist. Jantz was unable to readily locate a source of high-quality wool batting that she needed for bedding products, so Holland decided to become her source. He located a wool carding mill for sale in Oregon and shipped its 30,000 pounds of turn-of-the-century equipment to Montague, California, and began production.

Because consumers only see the finished mattresses and bedding in the showroom or online, they likely aren't aware of the behind-the-scenes work undertaken by Woolgatherer Carding Mill to produce the high-quality wool



A wool delivery arrives at Holy Lamb Organics in Oakville, Washington.

batting that sets theirs apart from the competition. Before the wool is carded, it is shipped to Bollman Industries' scouring mill in San Angelo, Texas, where the wool is scoured, at the request of buyers, to remove the lanolin, Moore explains. Lanolin gives wool its water-resistant quality but can contaminate the finished product.

When the newly cleaned wool returns to Woolgatherer Mill, its old-fashioned equipment combs the wool to create the batting that is fluffier and cleaner than is produced on modern equipment.

"We process 400 to 1,200 pounds a day, depending upon how large the order is," said Moore. "We can mill the wool into lengths of 7 to 88 inches in width and to diameters of 1.1 to 4.1 inches in thickness depending upon our manufacturer's requirements."

The wool supplied to Woolgatherer Carding Mill is sourced from New Zealand, England and around the United States including the Roseburg area, which is a "huge area for wool, some of the biggest growers on the coast," said Moore. Each year they bid on the Roseburg pool, which can result in five to six semi-truck loads of wool.

They also purchase Oregon Tilth-certified wool directly from the growers, and processing this wool requires extra work to keep the chain of cus-

tody intact. The wool is manufactured in different batches from the other wool, and it can take two days to properly clean the mill before beginning processing, Moore explains. In the warehouse, the wool is also stored in separate containers to prevent cross-migration. In spite of the extra work, Moore recognizes the benefit because there are customers who "want it organic, period. It's painstaking, yeah a little bit, but it's also staying true to the organic product."

Woolgatherer Carding Mill operates year-round. With a crew of one or two employees when Holland started the business, Moore says they have grown to 16 full-time employees. And while the recent recession has shown that nothing in the economy can be predicted, he sees "the business keep growing over the years to come as people become aware of the benefits of wool ... we won't see it grow in leaps and bounds like it did years ago, but I can see a real steady growth pattern happening."

Unfortunately Holland never lived to see the growth of his business; in 2003, he unexpectedly passed away after being diagnosed with cancer. Nathon Thill, a close friend who was affiliated with Shepherd's Dream, began overseeing the Woolgatherer Carding Mill's operations and assumed ownership at the request of Holland's wife. Moore describes Thill as "One of the smartest guys I've seen" when it came to knowing every breed of sheep, the different characteristics of each breed's wool and "just his in-depth knowledge of the whole bedding industry is so valuable."

Of their relationship with manufacturers, Moore is nothing but positive. He says they are willing to experiment creating new products if asked, one of which included testing an alpaca and an alpaca/wool blend. Although



The historic "Little Bit" General Store built in 1902 serves as Holy Lamb Organics' manufacturing center and retail store.



Moore sees Woolgatherer Carding Mill as a small, specialty mill, he is optimistic about its future growth.

“Who knows what tomorrow will bring; that’s the exciting thing about it.”

HOLY LAMB ORGANICS

The historic “Little Bit” General Store, located along the main thoroughfare of the city of Oakville, Washington, is not only the showroom for Holy Lamb Organics but is also the company’s production floor and warehouse. If you happen to drop by on a Monday, you will likely find the place bustling with employees cutting wool and cotton for a mattress topper or pillow that was ordered online over the weekend. With the holiday season just a few months away, business has increased just as Willow Whitton, owner of Holy Lamb Organics, predicted.

The inspiration for Whitton’s business came about as she prepared for a camping trip to the Redwoods.

“I wanted a pillow that was not only cozy but was free of synthetic materials but I couldn’t find anything, so I decided to make it myself,” she said. While working three jobs, she pursued her idea and created a handmade wool pillow that she believed others might like too. “I decided to quit my jobs and focus on doing something in my life that I could believe in.”

In 2000, the Olympia Food Co-Op became Whitton’s first wholesale account. She describes doing quite a bit of “guerilla marketing,” spending over a year doing free marketing and pitching her handmade, chemical-free wool pillows and mattress toppers to other green businesses. “I knew the

work was worthwhile because there was a need for chemical-free wool products, and there’s been awareness around chemical sensitivity ... people are seeking out healthy, organic solutions.”

An old school bus served as the company’s production floor, and a few years later Whitton faced a difficult decision when she realized that becoming a successful business required selling volume to remain solvent.

“Hiring an employee meant I had to learn to trust and delegate responsibility, and when Jenna came aboard in 2006 production moved to a room, then a two-car garage, and finally two years later to the 3,000-square-foot Little Bit General Store in Oakville.”

Whitton describes the general store as having a lot of character and history. The original 1902 furnishings are still in use – the counter is used as a display area for brochures, the company scrapbook and product samples,

“I knew the work was worthwhile because there was a need for chemical-free wool products...”

the tip-out bins that used to hold flour and potatoes now store inventory and the original wooden floor was refinished. Moving to the city of Oakville also proved to be a positive experience.

“I’ve had great support from the community,” said Whitton.

Of her customer base, Whitton estimates that 45 percent are retailers, both online and brick and mortar businesses, such as ABC Carpet & Home in New York City, Azure Standard and Sears online; 45 percent are from their website and the remaining 10 percent are walk-in customers, in spite of Holy Lamb Organics’ location in rural Grays Harbor County. “People are willing to drive because their health is important.”

Not all wool is the same, according to Whitton, and all of her products are made from beautiful wool batting produced at Woolgatherer Carding Mill.



Employees work at the Woolgatherer Carding Mill. The mill processes 400 to 1,200 pounds of wool per day.



Willow Whitton is owner of Holy Lamb Organics.

"I originally used a mill based out of Seattle, but this mill owner approached me and pitched me their story."

During the course of a year, nearly 2,000 pounds of wool are delivered to Holy Lamb Organics and what sets their wool products apart from their competitors is its sustainability. With the vast majority of organic wool in the garment and bedding industries coming from Australia and



An array of wool-based products line the shelves of Holy Lamb Organics' showroom.

New Zealand, Whitton's wool only travels hundreds of miles instead of thousands and it is U.S. sheep farmers participating in the Premium Eco-Wool Program whose livelihoods are supported.

The Eco-Wool Program is a voluntary program that rewards farmers for practicing sustainable farming practices by receiving a higher payment when selling their wool to the mill. Though the wool is currently coming from wool pools primarily from the Klamath region in Oregon, there will soon be a Pacific Northwest local buy which means the products will be even more locally produced.

Whitton describes working backward when it came to developing Holy Lamb Organics' product lines, starting with linens and then working up to big-ticket items. Her company manufactures pillows, comforters, toppers for mat-

tresses and Cozy Buns Organic Baby products. Of the four, the Cozy Buns Organic Baby line is the most recent, introduced in 2006. This line includes not only wool comforters and mattress toppers but also products specially designed for babies and nursing mothers.

Even during the recent downturn in the economy, Whitton says her company has experienced steady growth. Because their products are high-end, she recognizes that not everyone can afford top of the line so clearance items, just like the full-price products except for minor defects that don't detract from the item's use or appearance, are available for purchase.

Holy Lamb Organics also offers chemical-free wool mattresses, which are manufactured by other companies including Natural Sense, WJ Southard and Shepherd's Dream.

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These mattresses are made out of only organic cotton, wool and steel springs, though some models also include natural latex.

“The prices are fairly comparable to the other regular mattresses on the market, just without the synthetic materials and fire retardant chemicals,” said Whitton. Wool is naturally fire retardant and the mattresses that Holy Lamb Organics offer pass the safety tests with flying colors even without the fire-retardant chemicals. For people that cannot afford to invest in a wool mattress, she recommends a wool topper as a good intermediate step.

Because of the competitive marketplace, they are always renovating manufacturing techniques to be efficient, Whitton explained. “We analyze all our scraps and ask ourselves the question of what went into creating this product from the farmers caring for the sheep to the mill producing the wool, and we are then going to throw it into the garbage? No!” said Whitton. The Rekindle Program, introduced in 2010, makes Holy Lamb Organics a zero-waste facility. They partner with local artists who turn the “tiny resources”



Mattresses on display at Holy Lamb Organics offer many options.

into products such as baby booties, woolen balls, or tooth fairy pillows. Other zero-waste practices include returning the wool bags back to the mill or recycling the plastic, and Whitton even provides recommendations for disposing of their wool products at the end of their life cycle.

Sustainability also extends to Holy Lamb Organics' employees, many of whom are from the Oakville area.

“We provide profit sharing to our employees, which is very unique, and health care was offered in 2012, which was a huge step,” said Whitton. Since 2007, Holy Lamb Organics has been Co-op America Approved, a certification that recognizes companies for being environmental and socially responsible.