

Getting Your Raw Wool Fix from Far Away: Or, importing raw fleeces to where you call home from foreign ports of call...

by Carol Ekarius, co-author of *The Fleece & Fiber Sourcebook*
(with Deborah Robson, Storey Publishing, 2011)

I have seen a few questions popping up in places where people are talking about *The Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook* that go something like, “Now I am finding out about all these breeds, I’d like to be able to (buy/sell) fleeces to (fill in the name of a foreign locale to where the speaker lives). Can I order them from overseas and have them shipped in, or are there issues with importing raw wool?”

I actually looked into this somewhat as we were working on the book thanks to a conversation I had with Tim Booth, our wonderful friend at the British Wool Marketing Board. Tim went above and beyond the call of duty to (with the help of some other BWMB staff) get us many of the fleece samples and photos for some of the tougher to find British breeds. He said that BWMB was a bit cautious about sending fleeces to the United States because they sometimes got held up at customs, and occasionally rejected. Rejects got shipped back, which cost a bunch of money on what is still a low-value commodity overall.

Was I familiar with the regulations, he asked me?

“Not offhand, but I’ll find out,” I responded.

Importing to the United States

I called the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (it’s called APHIS for short). I was quickly connected with a veterinarian who said it is fine to import wool from many countries, as long as it isn’t covered in blood or manure. He explained that there are countries where Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) is active, and those countries have a few more considerations that have to be made, but those that are FMD free--including the United Kingdom--should not be a problem.

I told him Tim’s story of shipments that were turned around by U.S. Customs, and he said sometimes the customs agents, who actually do the inspections, may not

understand the rules regarding wool. He told me to check out the Animal Product Manual chapter on Hides and Related Byproducts (see the manual at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/plants/manuals/ports/downloads/apm_pdf/03_07hides.pdf) and he suggested that I send Tim the link with a note to check tables 3.7.14 through 3.7.17 (these charts are available at our www.fleeceandfiber.com website), and he also suggested that the best way to ensure that customs agents knew what to do was to include a written statement (see sample in sidebar) that this was raw wool from a healthy animal from an FMD-free country, and include the table that shows the customs agent that he or she should release the fleece from customs with no problem so long as it was free from blood.

I, _____, certify that the materials herein represent raw wool from a sheep, which were produced under sanitary conditions, that the wool is derived from clinically healthy animals, and that this is an FMD-free country according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Sign and notarize.

Lo and behold, these tables were a great resource. They helped quickly clarify the process for fibers coming into the United States from FMD-free or FMD-troubled countries. Blood and excess manure are to be diligently avoided, but if you are buying fleece for handspinning, you sure as heck want it to be well skirted, and there should never be any appreciable blood stains on a fleece from a well-sheared critter.

So, if someone in an FMD-free country (list at another link on this site) wants to sell wool in the United States, copy the first chart and include it in the package, along with your signed and notarized statement that this is raw wool from [name of animal] (usually sheep, but could be goat, musk ox, yak, alpaca, or other ungulates not protected as a threatened and endangered species), grown in an FMD-free country. If you are in an FMD-troubled country, include the appropriate chart, and no matter which chart you are using, use a yellow highlighter to emphasize the correct decision mode.

Exporting from the United States

This gets a bit more complicated for me, because each country has its own rules, but for European Union (EU) countries, I can define the current status. On February 25, 2011, the EU Commission adopted Regulation No. 142/2011, which allows that “fully treated” hair or wool can be imported into the EU countries from the U.S. and no documentation or APHIS approval is required. The U.S.-based exporter should have the European importer confirm in advance with the Border Inspection Post (BIP), through which the product will enter the EU, that the hair/wool is considered fully treated. In general hair/wool is considered by the EU to be fully treated if the wool/hair has undergone factory washing or been obtained as a by-product of the tanning of hides/

skins. Hair or wool that is not “fully treated” doesn’t require shipment certification either, but it must be shipped from a U.S. facility that has been inspected and approved by APHIS Veterinary Services to ship untreated hair/wool to the EU. You can find a list of these facilities at https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sanco/traces/output/listsPerActivity_en.htm#

The other suggestion from the U.S. veterinarian is to contact the relevant country's agricultural service (in Britain, this is DEFRA, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/>) and ask if they need an import permit. He also suggested that you can check with United States embassy in your country and ask for trade or import/export department, which may be able to help.