

# Agistment – Grazing Other Owners' Camelids

## *Six steps to positive agistment for everyone*

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The term "to agist" comes from English common law, and refers to the taking on of cattle for grazing in return for payment. This term is also used by camelid breeders to describe when llamas or alpacas belonging to one person are cared for at another farm.

There are many reasons why people agist llamas. The term can be short (a day or two during transport), medium (a few weeks or months while mating), or long (years). There are also circumstances where your llamas may never leave your farm, but you rely on someone else to care for them temporarily (farm-sitters). This article deals with some of the issues involved in agistment, and is meant to provide some helpful guidance for both parties in such an arrangement.

Ideally, caring for llamas and alpacas is a simple, even joyful task. They are smart, hardy, and easy to manage. Unfortunately, sometimes things go wrong- animals get sick, injured, or die. This is understandably traumatic, but even worse it can then give rise to disputes after the fact. Were the animals being cared for properly? Was the situation preventable? Was there a reasonable expectation that an issue should have been recognized and resolved?

The best way to prevent misunderstanding and disputes is for both parties in an Agistment arrangement to be fully informed. Know what is expected, know what will be provided, and know the people involved.

## Step 1- Selection

Sometimes circumstances dictate your selection of who will be agisting you animals (i.e. if you are sending your females off to be mated to a particular stud), and those circumstances also define their destination. Even so, there are questions to be asked before sending your animals away. If you are looking at longer term Agistment, then you may have more options, and more opportunities to find a place to fits your needs.

Remember, don't make assumptions! The management practices of an "old and large" llama farm are not necessarily good, and those of a "new and small" are not necessarily bad.

If you are looking for a particular service (for example, someone to watch over your pregnant females and lend a hand with birthing if necessary), check out the specific skills of the people involved. What problems have they seen and resolved? What training have they had? Have they ever had to get hands-on (or "hand-in" in the case of birth dystocias) before? This bit can be a somewhat counter-intuitive, as a person who "has never had a problem" does not have as much experience as a person who has dealt with multiple problems. Just be sure you can

distinguish if the problems are due to poor management (like animals that keep getting injured by debris around the farm) rather than just chance (birth dystocias).

## Step 2- Transport

How will the alpaca get to their destination? Is it 10 minutes in a horse float, or a long trip by truck and ferry? Is the vehicle safe and suitable for transport (legs have been broken in loading ramps designed for horses)? Does the operator have experience with camelids? Will there be facilities at each end to safely load and unload the animals?

## Step 3- Arrival on the new farm

Once the animal has arrived on the new farm, a number of issues need immediate attention.

- **Feed** - A sudden change of diet can cause potentially dangerous stomach upset. You don't want to take an animal that had been subsisting on a meagre diet of short grass and toss them into a hock deep lush pasture. Make sure the animals are gradually introduced to the new feed. Good quality meadow hay can be used to sustain the animals safely while they are moved to the new food. If their rumen is full of meadow hay, they won't gorge themselves on the very exciting new pasture.
- **Parasites** - When were the animals last wormed? What was the drench used on the previous property? Are faecal egg counts used? Are faecal-egg reduction tests used to ensure the drenches are working (and to determine if the animal is now carrying drench-resistant parasites)? Has the animal been checked for external parasites and other potentially infectious organisms before being introduced to the new herd?
- **Environment** - Is the new farm going to be a massive change of climate? This could be weather (moving from Northland to central Otago), or it could be topographical (moving from flat to steep hills- most camelids like hills, but some that have never seen hills before take time to acclimate). Animals not used to electric fences may need extra observation to ensure they don't get into trouble.

## Step 4-Meeting the new neighbors

If the arriving animals are going to be added to an existing mob, it is important to minimize stress. Camelids are hierarchical herd animals, and new animals must find their place in the group. Weanling, working male, empty female, pregnant female, late-term pregnant female, female with cria at foot- each has different hormone-driven needs for dominance, safety, security, or privacy.

To complicate matters animals can have very individual personalities- try to find out if the arriving animals have particularly dominant or submissive personalities. A dominant animal can get into trouble by fighting ferociously with other dominant animals in the new

herd. An especially submissive animal can find itself pushed around, denied feed or shelter, and stressed enormously. A good animal manager should observe these interactions, and take action where necessary.

Farm layout and design is also very important. Placing empty females directly adjacent to sexually-aggressive males can lead to unwanted pregnancies (a llama or alpaca can easily jump sheep fencing if they decide to), or it can lead to an injured male tangled in the wires. Likewise males have been badly injured and even killed fighting each other over a fence. In these cases the animals must be separated by a laneway at least. In some circumstances it might also be useful to break line of sight between some mobs, using hills, trees or other visual obstructions. "Out of sight, out of mind" can help to calm situations.

## Step 5 - Good Management

When it comes to long term health and well-being, a good management program is of paramount importance. There is no single formula for what is "best" on every farm, the particulars of geography, stocking rates, and animal use requires that the management practices be optimized for the local conditions. These are some of the questions you can ask about the management system on the farm.

**What is the feed situation like?** Are the animals set-stocked, or move through a set of paddocks in rotation? What is the average body condition score of animals on the farm? What is the stocking level (densely stocked animals can have more problems with fighting and stress)? Are there other types of stock on the farm, and do they ever mix with the llamas? Do they provide feed to supplement the pasture forage?

**How often do they check the stock (minimal visual inspection)?** How often are the animals brought in for a physical check (body score, weighing)? Who checks them, and what sort of camelid experience do they have? Camelids are notoriously stoic, and a trained eye is much better at catching problems early.

**What are the procedures for dealing with expectant mothers?** How often are they checked? What experience/training do they have for dealing with birth dystocias? What is their policy on feeding colostrum? Do they have access to plasma if necessary? Are they equipped and trained to deal with vulnerable/premature cria?

**What is their Facial Eczema risk?** Do they top their long grass in summer, spore-spray paddocks, feed zinc-pellets, or regularly count spore levels? FE risk assessment requires local knowledge, as micro-climates, topography and the vagaries of weather play a huge role in spore levels.

**What is their parasite management program?** What chemical drench do they use, and how often and at what dose? Do they do faecal egg tests? Is there a problem with *haemonchus contortus* (barbers pole worm) in the area? Do they use rotational cross-grazing with a non-camelid species (equine or bovine)?

**How much rye grass do they have?** How often do they have rye grass staggers on the property? Do they have good plans for dealing with staggering animals?

**Do they test for TB?** What is their status? Do they have any procedures in place for catching infectious diseases that can be difficult to test for (TB, Johne's)?

**If you are sending animals off to be mated, how will the mating take place (pen or paddock)?** How will pregnancy be confirmed? Will you have some way to test that the pregnancy has not slipped after the females return to your farm? (A small fraction of pregnancies naturally fail.)

**What sort of routine preventative care do they provide (vaccinations, Vitamin AD&E)?**

**How are records kept and what kind of reporting can the agister expect?** Will they receive frequent updates on the condition of their animals? What is the plan of action in the case of an illness or emergency? Will the animal get looked after in it's best interests even if the owners cannot be contacted by telephone to give permission for a visit to the vet?

It is also very important to balance the expectations of both parties in an Agistment arrangement. **Are the animals pets (even cherished pets), or are they stock?** There is no correct answer to this question, but the answer has significant implications for management.

Finally, there is the issue of each party understanding what they can control, and thus what they have responsibility for. The person sending their animals away must fully and honestly inform the receiver if there are any particular issues or peculiarities with the animals. For example, we had a female alpaca with epilepsy, so we would need to make sure any person caring for her knew what a petit mal seizure means for her health and management, and for the animals around her.

The person who manages the animals must recognize that they have the power to control day to day operations, and thus have responsibility for the outcome. It is not proper to blame the person who provided the animals, if trouble arises in the course of normal camelid behaviour. For example, an animal could be described as "very mellow and easy to handle", yet turn out to be very aggressive. This is not necessarily a incorrect description of the animal- it may well be that they are very calm on their home farm, but in a new environment with new paddock mates they suddenly become more aggressive. The manager must be able to assess the situation, and respond appropriately.

## Step 6 - The costs

Agistment is rarely free. While "free" agistment is included in most on-farm mating deals, you are still paying for the service through the stud fee, and it is important for both parties to enumerate what is and is not covered.

- Are the routine "shots" (vaccinations, drench, vitamin AD&E) covered? Is it specified when and how they will be administered? Who will pay?
- If extra feed becomes necessary (due to drought or other

circumstances) will that incur an extra cost?

- Who pays for the shearing? Who gets the fleece? Who decides when to shear?
- Who pays for TB testing, Faecal Egg Counts, or other routine veterinary testing?
- Are there any pre-restrictions placed on veterinary bills? This can prevent runaway costs. Is there an agreement where the manager will do their best to communicate vet costs before procedures are commenced?
- How is payment arranged?

## Agistment Agreements and Insurance

Consider purchasing insurance for your agisted llamas or alpacas. Make sure it covers transport. Make sure the manager knows if the animals are insured, and if the insurance carries any requirements for veterinary care (post mortem reports, second opinions before euthanasia, etc).

It may also be good to delineate visiting rights. Does the manager require notice before a visit, or is it a "drop by at your convenience" arrangement?

Both parties in an agistment arrangement should consider getting references on the other party.

Having a signed agreement can help prevent later recriminations. The alpaca association web site has example forms for agistment agreement. You can use this, or use it as a template to write your own.

Ideally every agistment goes smoothly. The females get pregnant easily, cria are birthed without difficulty, and everyone has an easy stress-free time. Unfortunately, drama does happen, and not all outcomes are cheerful. There is nothing so terrible as having someone's cherished animal die in your arms despite your best efforts- something I can say from sad personal experience. A good agistment agreement can minimize problems after something goes wrong. There are responsibilities on both sides of such an arrangements and all parties need to be aware that there are also times when even with the best intentions, accidents happen.

With a good sound agreement written and signed by all parties, upset and argument is reduced to a minimum and a smooth-running agistment can take place. Remember, a written agreement in no way implies a lack of trust but represents a sound, professional approach towards definite responsibilities of both parties.