

The Mating / Buying Game – Playing it Safe

Dianne Summers who runs the Camelid TB Support Group together with British Veterinary Camelid Society vet Dr. Gina Bromage give some practical advice on how to mate your females and buy safely.

We all know we have to change the way we do things. At the end of May 2010 DEFRA confirmed there were currently 30 camelid herds under restriction to TB and DEFRA also confirmed that from the 8 new breakdowns in the first 5 months of 2010 3 of the 8 were from purchase or movement. At the end of August 2010 Defra confirms 35 herds are currently under restriction. A further 14 herds in contact with the TB Support Group have come out of restriction so we know a minimum of 49 herds have been affected. Remember not all herds with TB are in touch with the TB Support group.

The skin test fails to detect the vast majority of TB infected camelids - so while it goes without saying the risk of TB is very much on all of our minds, it isn't only TB we need to consider - it is any disease that can be contracted by coming into contact with other alpacas/llamas. For example BVD, mange, mites, gastro intestinal parasites in particular E-Mac – diseases that can kill. We need to change the way we do certain things. One of those is mating, the other is buying new stock.

So how do we go about mating our females and buying safely? And which method is the lowest risk and which poses the highest risk?

MATING SAFELY

1. The lowest risk is obviously owning your own stud male but not everyone has their own stud male nor wants to.
2. The next level of risk is mobile or drive-by mating. Why? Simply because the contact is one on one and minimal. Besides, you do have the added benefit of knowing your female has been mated to the stud you have paid for and YOU can control the bio security measures - so in our opinion this is a much lesser risk than the third option. To reduce the risk even further select a breeder who doesn't offer on farm agistment mating.
3. Agisted mating. This has to be the highest risk and not only has it been documented by the VLA that alpacas have contracted TB whilst away on agisted mating but many in the Tb support group have contracted TB from sending their alpacas away for short term or long term agistment. In our opinion agisted mating isn't worth the risk.

Sending your females away for months on end where they are often placed in a field with dozens of other females from all over the country is a must stop. We have all done this in the past. As Dianne Summers explains " I have only ever sent one female away for mating and when I went to visit her she was in a field with dozens of other females, many of them had obvious signs of mites/mange. I decided then never to send my females away again and that was before I knew about TB/BVD/EMac etc."

You can have no idea what diseases the other visiting females carry and you can have no idea if the visiting females are TB/Disease free, or what their previous movements have been. Let's not also forget the stress that this causes your females - the effects of stress on the immune system are well known. The risk works both ways to those offering agistment services and those sending females away for agistment..

Having a vet health check, or faecal sample is strongly recommended but these **do not cover TB**. However faecal samples are very important for many other diseases and must be carried out both before and after moving your animals.

Unless the breeder can provide your females with their own clean bio secure paddock for the entire stay, with no nose to nose contact with any other alpacas or neighbouring livestock, and they maintain high bio security standards then we strongly suggest you do not send your females or any of your herd away on agistment. REMEMBER that if the breeder comes down with TB whilst your alpacas are on their farm, then your animals will also be placed under restriction. They will have to go through testing and cannot be returned to your farm until the breeder is out of restriction - you then have the concern of bringing infection back to your own herd. Think long and hard about sending away any of your herd either for short or long term.

BUYING SAFELY

TB has and is being brought in by purchase. This isn't a rumour - it is fact because sadly many of these people who have purchased alpacas with TB are now in the TB Support Group. One of our support group had only owned alpacas for 7 weeks, another just 4 weeks and another 10 months before going under restrictions.

Many reputable breeders with quality stud services and stock available that used to show have now stopped attending shows and unnecessary movements until a reliable ante mortem test is available. Check out breeder's web sites - if it says alpacas rarely get ill and they don't get many diseases - then we suggest you don't do business with them because they are knowingly giving incorrect advice. Alpacas get diseases similar to all other livestock. Any honest breeder would state that. Ask them what bio security measures they have in place - ask them about TB and other diseases. If they say TB isn't a problem - we suggest you run for the hills and find a breeder who says it is. What you want to hear is a breeder say is "Yes TB is a problem and here are the measures I have taken to reduce the risk to my herd." If they are carrying out unnecessary movements and have not implemented high bio security on their farms then they are not taking the TB issue seriously enough.

Breeders declaring all their stud males and stock have had a negative skin test does not mean the alpaca or llama is TB free. Anyone who declares a camelid is TB free because it has had a negative skin test is giving false information. There is NO current private test available that can declare an alpaca or llama is TB Free. This is why we need a reliable ante mortem test so we can all trade with confidence. The Support Group is working closely with DEFRA/AH and VLA in the hope to achieve this.

Blood tests are currently only available to herds under restriction and are optional. The breeder can refuse to blood test and come out of restriction on the back of a skin test. You could be then buying from them or be having your females mated with their stud males.

Lastly whatever option you chose remember to get the stud provider/breeder to give you their completed self declaration form - a sample of which can be downloaded on this website. Ask to see their herd/health movement book - ask questions and get the answers in writing - better still consider getting a legal contract drawn up, so that all documents and statements are part of your agreement to pay.

Play it safe, do your homework and don't be afraid to ask the right questions. Don't put your animals at unnecessary risk - an outbreak of any disease, let alone TB, will give you plenty of time to wish you had.

Dr Gina Bromage and Dianne Summers
Camelid TB Support Group
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