

# WHERE'S THE WOOL?

By Sarah Donaldson

When Diana Wickman first started raising North Country Cheviot sheep as a grazing tenant on Peterson Farms, in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, she viewed shearing as a straight expense. It cost her \$10 per head, and she could either dispose of the wool, or give it to local gardeners for mulching.

Then, a few years ago, Amy DuFault, of the Southeastern New England Fibershed, asked Wickman what she was doing with her wool. Wickman explained that she'd been giving it away to gardeners.

"She said, 'Are you crazy?'" Wickman recalled. With some help, Wickman and her farm partner, Simon Thorrold connected with a wool scouring company in Rhode Island, then sent the cleaned wool to Zeilinger Wool Company, in Michigan, to be made into duvets to sell. The duvets quickly sold out in 2023, and then sold out again this year. Wickman is already taking orders for 2025.

Wickman's situation is not uncommon. For many meat sheep farmers, wool is a byproduct to be disposed of, given away, or sold at a low price. While finer wool can be made into clothing, medium and coarse wool isn't often used in clothing anymore.

There are a lot of other possibilities for wool, from insulation, to fertilizer, to bedding, and more. But for many farmers, getting the wool from the sheep to the product isn't worth it.

A big part of the problem is limited infrastructure for scouring wool, DuFault explained.

For the last two years, DuFault has been heading up a Waste Wool Working Group for Fibershed. She started out by inviting presenters from all over the country and world to talk about other uses for wool. But in most cases, presenters were sourcing wool from other countries instead of the U.S.

"We'd think, 'wow, this is a viable business. Why aren't we doing it here?'" DuFault said. "It always came down to the scouring,"

ties or mills that do some scouring, but there aren't a lot of options for farmers with too little wool to send to the large facilities and too much to do at home.

In DuFault's fibershed, many farmers would have to wait six months to a year to get their wool cleaned and returned to them.

"If we had more in this area, we could be moving wool through faster," DuFault said. "The wool doesn't have to be perfect, just clean, to be made into insulation, or a duvet ... or a pillow."

DuFault is currently waiting to see if she can get funding for a pilot study on scouring in the northeast, looking at cooperative models. She believes cooperatively-run scouring mills could help farmers get their wool processed in a reasonable time frame, and open up new markets for wool.

## Other Options

There are farmers who have been able to make it work, even with limited scouring infrastructure. Even before adding duvets to their products, Wickman and her farm partner sold sheepskin pelts to try to minimize their farm's waste.

They send the pelts to Driftless Tannery, in Wisconsin. They have had success selling the pelts and duvets, mostly locally.

"We live in a very supportive local community," Wickman said.

But making the pelts, in particular, isn't an easy process. They have to pick up the pelts the same day the sheep are butchered, then immediately take them home and trim, clean, and lay out the pelts. The pelts then sit for six weeks before shipping to the tannery.

"It's gross; it's dirty work. I always say it's my least favorite product to produce, but my favorite when they come back from the tannery," Wickman said.

Shipping wool can also be tricky. Wickman typically vacuum packs it and uses several layers of duct tape to keep it from popping the box open.

## *Sheep Farmers Look into Alternative Uses for Wool in Tough Market*



## Infrastructure

There are large scouring facilities in South Carolina and Texas, and some small facili-

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**Left: Wool pellets made by Kestrel Ridge Pellet Co.  
Below: Megan Landef-Murphy on her farm in Nebraska.**

Photo courtesy of Kestrel Ridge Pellet Co.



Photo by Elements by Kayla

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## Wool Pellets

Some farmers have also started making wool pellets, which can be used as fertilizer. After her first year of shearing sheep on her ranch in south-central Nebraska, Megan Landef-Murphy had a hard time figuring out what to do with the wool. She raises sheep for meat, and their wool is coarse.

Selling it would have likely gotten her about 2-5 cents per pound, and that didn't seem worth it.

"I didn't have a ton of it, but it was taking up a lot of space," Landef-Murphy said.

She went down a Google rabbit hole and soon came across a study from the University of Vermont that suggested wool pellets could be an alternative to a traditional organic fertilizer. Lander-Murphy decided to give it a go and founded Kestrel Ridge Pellet Co. She had her first full

year selling wool pellets in 2023.

Wool pellets are "kind of having their moment right now," said Leanna Maksymiuk, owner of Waste Not Wool, which produces and sells wool pellets in Lumby, British Columbia. That's partly because it's doable for smaller farms to take on.

"As smaller family farms, we can take on the investments of doing the pelleting," she said. "But as individual families, we can't take on creating wool insulation."

The process for wool pelleting is fairly simple, Landef-Murphy said. She uses a wool shredder to get the wool ready for the pellet mill. She doesn't have to go through the scouring process.

Both Maksymiuk and Landef-Murphy collect wool that would otherwise likely go to waste from other farmers around them.

"When I started talking to pro-



Photo courtesy of Diana Wickman

**Diana Wickman with some of her North Country Cheviot sheep, in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.**



Photo courtesy of Kestrel Ridge Pellet Co.

**Wool pellets made by Kestrel Ridge Pellet Co.**

ducers, they said ‘just take it, we don’t need it.’ I’m acting more as a disposal service for them,” Makysmiuk said. “I haven’t paid for wool yet for pelleting.”

When she started pelleting wool a few years ago, Makysmiuk was the first she knew of in British Columbia to do it. Now, she knows of at least four or five others. She hopes to see the industry grow by region.

“It starts getting not so environmentally-friendly when you’re trucking wool six hours one way and six hours back, and then shipping it across the country,” Maksymiuk explained.

### Education

So far, they’ve both mostly sold pellets to home gardeners. Landef-Murphy said in her first year of selling wool pellets, she spent a lot of time explaining what wool pellets are. But overall, her business has been well-received, and now in her second full year, she’s on track to make a profit.

“It does take a little education and effort, but it’s had a lot of good feedback,” she said.

Matt Kleinhenz, professor and extension specialist in Ohio State University’s Department of Horticulture and Crop Science, has been studying possible uses for wool in horticulture.

There are a lot of fabrics used in horticulture, like weed barriers, and wool may be a good alternative fiber for some of those things. Kleinhenz noted being able to make and market new products will be key for wool producers.

“A lot of things are introduced before people know they want them,” Kleinhenz said. “Did anyone know they wanted a Walkman? ... I don’t think so. They were introduced, and people discovered they wanted them.”

But while some home gardeners have been trying wool pellets, it may take more for commercial operations to give it a go. Kleinhenz said it will be important for those growers to see solid evidence of how wool can work in their operations, through research and testing.

“What I would hope, going forward, is that the horticulture world learns more about wool, and the wool world learns more about horticulture ... then they can most reliably determine if they have a potential cooperation opportunity or not,” Kleinhenz said.

*Sarah Donaldson is an award-winning freelance journalist, based in Ohio.*



**Leanna Makysmiuk stands with a load of wool she picked up from farmers around her in Lumby, British Columbia.**

Photo courtesy of Leanna Makysmiuk

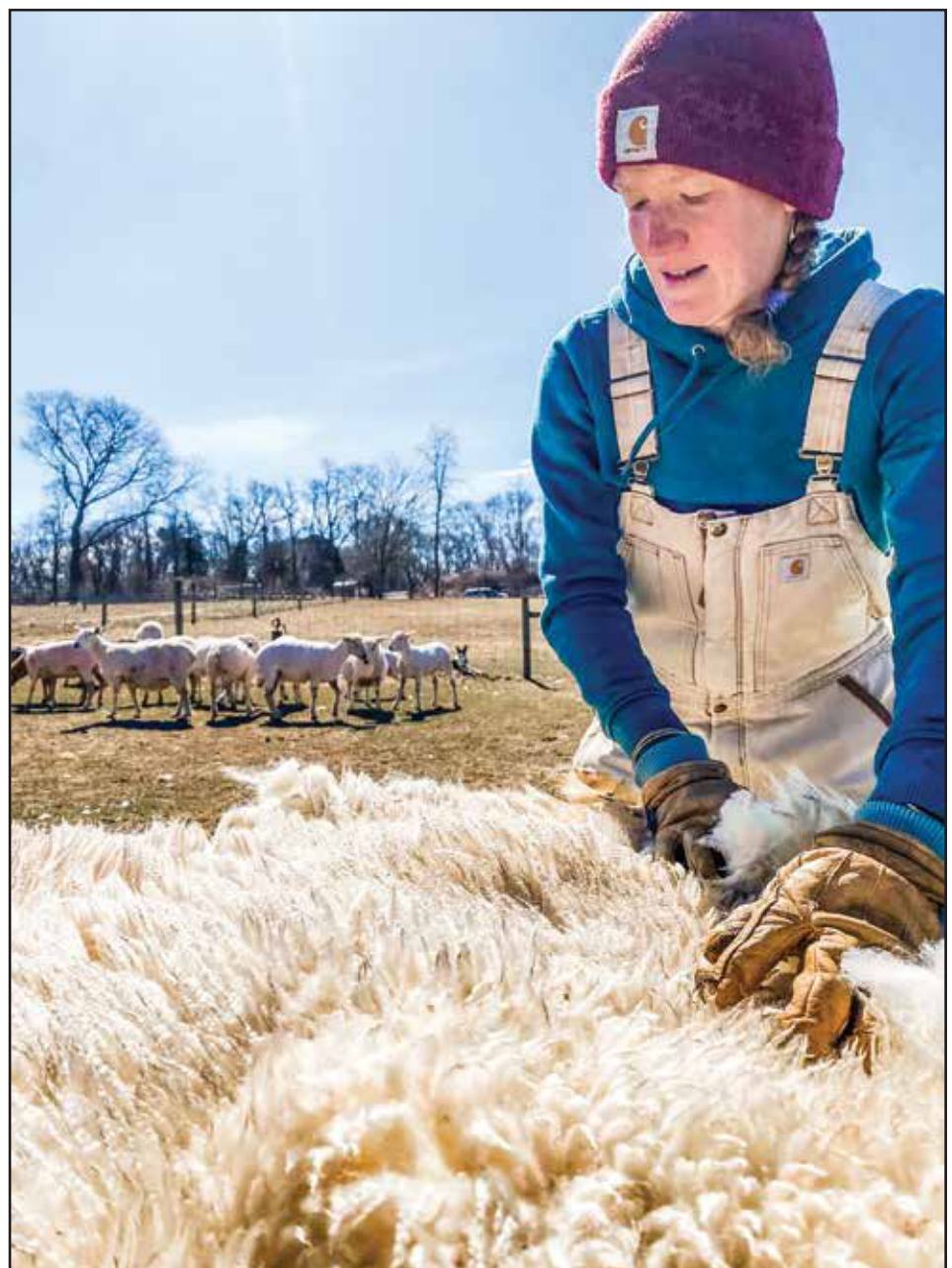


Photo courtesy of Diana Wickman

**Diana Wickman at her farm in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.**