Putting the Suri industry in perspective for new as well as established Suri breeders, can be a very useful exercise. For all of us in the Suri business, knowing where we came from and what the present looks like can facilitate a better understanding of our potential. Developing future expectations based on a clear understanding of our past and current positions gives credibility to those aspirations.

Let's look at this perspective from the viewpoint of promoting the Suri alpaca as the “Rarest of Breeds, Ultimate Natural Fiber.”

Rarest of Breeds
In a relative sense, this statement is as true today as it was 16 years ago when the first Suris came to the U.S. Those few words capture the essence of the investment opportunity by positioning the Suri as a rare and unique commodity relative to many other investment options.

We are still a very young industry. The numbers speak for themselves. In the decade between 1998-2008, Suri numbers only increased approximately tenfold from 2,500 to no more than 25,000. To those breeders who participated in the birth of this industry that may seem like a lot. But it’s not! Those are very small numbers relative to any other domestic livestock breed. There are approximately 100,000 Huacaya alpacas in the U.S. That’s four times the number of Suris. Among all camelid breeds the Suri is, by all definitions, uncommon. In South America, it’s estimated that Suris represent only 3-5% of all alpacas. Although their history in the U.S. started quite recently, these are not exotic animals or pets. They are domesticated livestock bred for thousands of years to produce exotic fiber.

There are very compelling financial reasons for not promoting Suris as being in the exotic category.
In the beginning, alpacas were marketed as being valuable primarily because of their scarcity. While still applicable, this concept can no longer stand alone to drive the industry forward.

Within our industry, some controversy remains about whether Suri alpacas are a tax sheltered investment opportunity or a sustainable livestock industry. In reality, they are both. We are in a period of transition, moving from one toward the other. This is not an either/or situation. As an industry, it is imperative that we understand, embrace, and, over a period of time, facilitate this evolution. It is tremendously important that, as an industry, we have a clear understanding of this.

For many of us, the tax advantages of the depreciation allowance on alpacas was an important aspect of our investment decisions in the past and remains so today. Such “tax-advantaged investments” are available to investors in many livestock industries, not just alpacas. Depreciation is an important part of many business models and is especially important in the early stages of a new business partly because it helps to offset the risk of investing in an entrepreneurial venture. The Small Business and Work Opportunity Act has been extended through 2010 and the maximum annual deduction currently stands at $125,000. Therefore, it will remain an attractive factor supporting industry growth in the future.

As marketing strategies, scarcity, and depreciation allowances may not be sufficient to propel us into becoming a long-term, profitable, and sustainable industry. Achieving that requires the adoption and evolution of the next stage of the business model. The “Livestock Model” as presented by Bret Kaysen, Ph.D., in his article, “The Power of Change” in the Fall/Winter 2007 edition of PurelySuri, will make it possible to achieve that long-term goal of sustainable profitability. Dr. Kaysen’s article is a “must read” for every Suri breeder. This is a business model that we can sell to the marketplace and one that will take our industry successfully to the next level of validation and profitability. The success of this transition hinges on our promotion of Suri fiber as the “Ultimate Natural Fiber.”

Ultimate Natural Fiber

Ultimately, our industry’s foundation and future is, to a major degree, about fiber. We have a compelling story to tell the consumer. How we present that story will, in large part, determine our future.

Here is how our story can be told in the marketplace:

Suri’s are rare, elegant, and unique fiber-producing breed originating from the Andes Mountains of South America. They produce an environmentally friendly, naturally lustrous fiber with exquisite handle that feels luxurious next to your skin. Suri fiber is more lustrous than cashmere, finer than mohair; more cuddly than silk, and naturally flame retardant. It’s also strong, durable, washable, and hypoallergenic. When spun into yarn and woven into fabric, it produces some of the finest textiles on Earth. In 22 distinct natural colors, Suri fiber is truly the ‘eco’ fiber of the future.

The number of these incredibly unique animals had dropped to dangerously low levels and hybridization with other camellid breeds was endangering their unique genetic heritage in their native lands. Suris are now undergoing a successful renaissance here in the U.S. They have been rescued from extinction and are now raised with care on America’s small farms.

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The Suri Network (SN) is evaluating the concept of “Certified Suri Fiber” as a marketing tool used to add value to the product in the consumer’s mind, similar to the beef industry’s concept of “Certified Angus Beef.” Fiber with a story is what the high-end consumer is looking for. By creating a unique image of the “ultimate natural fiber” for our consumer, we carve out a market niche that adds value to that fiber. Enhancing the value of the fiber ultimately adds value to Suris at all levels of the Suri livestock production model.

A Bold Vision

How do we get from where we are today to where we want to be in 5 or even 15 years? Every aspect of our lives proves time and again that we cannot achieve at the highest level in the future by relying on methods of the past. We must choose between stagnation and innovation. Nothing stands still. The future is rushing our way at an accelerating pace. What will it look like? Quite literally, that future is vitally dependent on our vision and actions today.

The SN has chosen a bold vision for the future of this industry: **To become the world’s premier producer of Suri genetics, fiber, and value-added Suri products.**

Can this be accomplished? Of course! It starts with everyone in the industry embracing this vision as his or her own. It’s then a matter of telling our story well, supporting it with technology, and delivering the vision to the marketplace. This is the only way we can secure our place in the luxury fiber market. Will you embrace this vision? Remember: changing the way we think will change our future.

What better way to preserve, protect, and promote the Suri alpaca, the mission originally envisioned by the founders of SN. That mission is as appropriate today as it was years ago. But, it requires more aggressive strategies in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

You may ask yourself, how is that possible? Peru, Bolivia, and to a lesser extent Chile, have always been the leaders in this industry. How can we challenge that leadership? A quick look at the numbers validates the possibility based on numbers alone. Currently the U.S. has about 25,000 Suri alpacas. Peru, Bolivia, and Chile have about 300,000 Suri alpacas and that number is relatively stable because the Suri is a very minor sector of their alpaca industry. How long will it take to grow the U.S. herd to comparable numbers? Estimates are somewhere between 10-20 years. That’s adequate time to develop the infrastructure needed to deliver on our vision of being the world leader in genetics and the creation of value added products. No matter how many Suris we produce.
in the U.S., they will always be rare relative to the Huacaya and other fiber-producing livestock. So, being a dominant player on the world stage is achievable for the U.S. Suri population, a possibility not necessarily shared with the Huacaya whose numbers in South America are in the millions. Over time, the United States truly has a unique opportunity to become a dominant world producer of Suri fiber and genetics. Now that’s exciting!

What about the quality of genetics? How do we lead the way in this category? The answer will be found through technology driven by objective data utilizing proven livestock models. We can also apply advanced animal science techniques developed in other production livestock models to the breeding and production of Suri alpacas, which can vastly accelerate the rate of genetic gain and advances in the quality and quantity of fiber. These techniques are not yet being applied on a large scale to the breeding of Suri alpacas anywhere in the world. It is only a matter of time before they are, and the U.S. should take the lead.

As members of the SN, you have taken a very big step in the right direction with the development of a Suri Breed Standard. With the collection of appropriate data, development of tools to calculate Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs), and the institution of a classification system, our vision of world leadership can move toward reality.

Long-term results depend on the actions we take now. The SN is facilitating those actions through the functions of the Breed Standards Council, formed in August 2007. Increasing numbers of Suri alpaca and consistent fiber quality are both vital to the future of this industry. As an active and informed member, your involvement in this process is vital to our success.

Achieving such an ambitious goal requires a plan to achieve that goal. In August 2007, the SN took an important step by developing a Strategic Plan that serves as a guide for future SN activities and prioritizes those activities and actions. The plan is designed to propel the industry toward a very profitable and sustainable future.

As a result of the strategic planning process, several very powerful visions and goals have been developed for the Suri Network as we chart the future success of the industry:

- To become the world’s premier producer of Suri genetics, fiber, and value-added Suri products
- To promote the Suri Alpaca as the ultimate livestock investment
- To brand our production as “Certified Suri Fiber” (CSF)
- To enhance value at all levels of the Livestock Production Model

The future is ours to grasp and through a coordinated effort with your support, these goals are certainly attainable!