

The
Advocates

Pioneering New Trails for American Wool

BY GLENNA MUSANTE



In the shadow of the Cascade Mountains on Oregon's high desert, from her home on the vast Imperial Stock Ranch, Jeanne Carver is carving a new path for American wool. It doesn't lead to a new land. But it

does create a destination for gear and apparel brands searching for a transparent source of high-quality, sustainably raised American wool.

In 2017, Carver and her husband Dan were the first sheep ranchers in the United States to adopt Textile Exchange's Responsible Wool Standard (RWS) for their 32,000-acre ranch, where sheep have been present since 1871. In 2018, with brands knocking on the door for traceable, sustainably produced wool, they launched Shaniko Wool Company, a farm group organized to expand the availability of RWS-certified wool grown in the USA.

In addition to providing clear guidelines for humane animal husbandry in the raising and shearing of sheep for wool production, the RWS also sets standards for land management and worker welfare.

Through Shaniko Wool Company, Carver is now leading an industry expansion of the RWS in the U.S. The ranchers in Carver's fold are the only sheep growers in the U.S. harvesting wool grown under the standard's exacting requirements and the only ranchers approved to supply RWS wool in the U.S. and North America.

The work they are doing is literally changing the domestic wool landscape in terms of enhanced land management. In turn, Shaniko Wool Company has given major brands, such as Ralph Lauren, a source of American-grown wool with a pristine, verifiable sustainability story that they can use in the marketing of their products. This includes the sweaters and wool hats worn by the U.S. Olympic teams at the 2022 Winter Olympics.

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Shepherding the RWS in North America is also the manifestation of a passion that both Jeanne and her late husband Dan have had for Oregon's high desert and America's storied west.

A Pioneer's Homestead Claim

The Imperial Stock Ranch has a long history as a producer of fine merino/ramboullet wool. It was founded in 1871 by Richard Hinton, a pioneer born on the Oregon Trail, and is the only privately owned ranch in Oregon recognized as a National Historic District that is still operating. The ranch has been in continuous operation producing sheep, cattle, grain and hay since its founding.

By 1900, Hinton's homestead claim, along what later would be named Hinton Creek, grew into the largest land and livestock operation in Oregon. During the 1880s, the sheep industry grew rapidly in Oregon, and the semi-arid interior region of the state – where the ranch is located – was well-suited to raising fine wool sheep.

Over time, Hinton built the Imperial Stock Ranch's reputation for fine grade wool, and when his son James took



In 2017, The Imperial Stock Ranch became the first sheep ranch in the world certified under the RWS.

over the ranch in 1915, they had 35,000 head of sheep and 1,000 head of cattle.

Many of the original buildings that supported this massive operation are still in use today.

A New Legacy

When Dan Carver bought the ranch in 1988, he felt a deep responsibility to honor the legacy built by the stewards of this land who came before him. "He wanted to do the best job he could," said Jeanne, "and went to agencies like the Soil and Water Conservation District and the Natural Resource Conservation Service for help."

Working together with his agency partners, "they spent about a year conducting assessments and establishing a monitoring program," she said, "and wrote a comprehensive plan to manage the entire operation, with the health of the ranch's natural resources as their number one goal. They called it a Conservation Management Plan."

"At about this time we learned that only two salmon had returned to spawn in Buckhollow Creek, which begins on our land and is a major tributary to the Deschutes River," she added. Buckhollow Creek was historically an important spawning stream for salmon.

Working collaboratively with agency partners and other landowners in the basin, the salmon population returned,

Carver said, "and went from the brink of loss to a thriving population. There is no greater motivator than to be part of something like this." The plan also helped restore and preserve the ranch's vast grazing lands.

The Standard

According to Jeanne, the Carver's involvement with the RWS was a natural next step given their longstanding commitment to the land and animal stewardship. In 2017, The Imperial Stock Ranch became the first sheep ranch in the world certified under the RWS. And since certification of her ranch, Jeanne has worked with Textile Exchange to bring other sheep ranches in the U.S. into RWS certification.

"The Responsible Wool Standard is an industry tool designed to recognize the best practices of farmers, ensuring that animal fiber comes from farms with a progressive approach to managing their land, and from animals that have been treated responsibly," said Liz Mamo from Textile Exchange, which is an NGO dedicated to developing transparent sustainability standards for the global textile industry.

"[It] ensures that animals are treated with respect to the Five Provisions [established by Textile Exchange] to promote positive welfare outcomes," Mamo added. "The demand for certified wool is encour-



Jeanne Carver tending to her flock

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Carver leaning against the side of one of the ranch out buildings

aging more farmers to reach certified status, which means that their sheep are not only not subject to mulesing but also are managed to meet all the other animal welfare requirements of the RWS including animal health, animal handling, living environment and more."

RWS certification – which is conducted through a detailed, third-party audit – can be expensive, and to make it more accessible to sheep ranchers in North America, the Carvers formed Shaniko Wool Company to help lessen the cost for member ranches. This farm group currently includes nine ranches.

It was named after Shaniko, Ore., which during its heyday in the early 1900s was known as the "Wool Capital of the World."

"We formed the company to scale the supply of RWS wool for brands manufacturing in the United States that wanted a U.S.-supply of high-quality wool," said Carver. "And we chose the name Shaniko Wool Company to honor the deep heritage of wool ranching in this region and in western America."

Ranches in the farm group are able to sell their wool at a 10 percent to 20 percent premium over the typical price of wool grown in the U.S. "It's more profitable for them," said Carver, "be-

cause brands are willing to pay more for wool that has the RWS certification.

"Because of our experience taking our harvest to product stage and into the marketplace, we understood why traceability and third-party oversight would be important to brands and their customers," Carver explained.

In the 1990s, offshoring of the U.S. textile industry contributed to a significant reduction in the number of sheep ranches in the United States. It was a difficult time for the Carvers. Overnight, they lost their wool buyer – a company that had been buying wool from the ranch for 100 years – and were suddenly faced with the stark possibility that sheep could disappear from their land.

To stay in business, they changed their business model and began looking for new markets for their wool. That experience forced them to reinvent how they took their wool to market and in the process, they ended up building a broad network of new customers.

Those lessons learned – and the contacts they made – have become another point of value for the ranchers that join the Shaniko Wool Company farm group. Shaniko Wool Company buys their wool and then moves it through the supply chain, marketing and selling it.

Carver's role at Shaniko Wool Company also includes education and training, guiding the paperwork and documentation required for certification, conducting internal audits and providing an economical way for ranches to earn RWS certification.

Andree Soares, manager of Talbott Sheep Company in Los Banos, Calif., is one of the ranchers in Shaniko Wool Company Farm Group. She was referred to the Carvers through another rancher in the group and after several conversations and a great deal of research decided to sign on and commit to the process of becoming certified.

"The reason we did this, was because after I became aware of the program and Jeanne's support for it, and for the ranchers, it was a simple decision," she said, adding, "everything about the RWS supports the values I have with regard to how animals should be treated." The land management and sustainability components of the RWS were also important to her.

Quantifying the Impact

For your typical ranchers, key numbers play a critical role in the daily management of flocks and profits. This includes the appropriate herd numbers compared to the healthy capacity of the land, the cost of labor to help care for the ranch, the cost of buying and maintaining farm equipment, upkeep of the buildings, the cost of feed, profit margins from the sale of the wool harvest. It's a lengthy list.

Those numbers are important to Carver and the ranchers she works with, but other measures are just as essential. For her, this includes the number of salmon returning to the Deschutes River, the annual number of tons of wool sheared and sold under the Shaniko Wool Company brand, the number of U.S. ranch acres certified to RWS land management methods, the number of tons of CO2 sequestered each year through proper land management and the growing of wool and other measures that indicate the health of the land is trending forward.

It's a little-known fact, but wool is largely made up of CO2. In fact, roughly half of every wool fiber is CO2. And that has become another

number she and farmers in her group are beginning to measure.

Currently, the ranches in her farm group represent about 2.5 million acres of land in the western U.S. and 35,000 head of merino/rambouillet sheep. In 2022, Carver estimates those ranches will harvest approximately 170 tons of RWS-certified Shaniko Wool Company wool.

But RWS certification isn't limited to sheep ranches. "The U.S. textile supply chain is now getting involved in the RWS, [and] supporting the use of the RWS logo on products," said Carver. "Up until now, brands could say they had sourced RWS certified Shaniko Wool but could not put the logo on their finished goods. That will change. In the last month, a wool scouring and combing mill, two spinning mills, one dye house, and two knitting manufacturers in the U.S. have gone through RWS audits in order to certify the full traceability of their wool and content claims."

According to Textile Exchange, much of this has been done by or with help from Jeanne Carver.

"She is not only a U.S. pioneer for Responsible Wool Standard but also



Inside the 120-year-old facilities at Imperial Stock Ranch

a global pioneer," said Mamo. "She [runs] the first ranch certified in the world. Jeanne has been a huge advocate for RWS and has now built an entire certified supply chain in the U.S. She is also well aligned with Textile Exchange's Climate+ strategy and is spearheading action through Shaniko Wool Company Carbon Initiative."

Although Carver's work helping U.S. sheep ranchers harvest RWS-certified wool began with a dream grounded in the American pioneer

spirit, the result of her work addresses current and urgent climate and textile industry supply chain issues.

"Our goal is to measure the actual impacts of our ranching practices [and] determine the net carbon budget of each ranching operation and our aggregate whole. The health of the land has never been more critical to a growing group of stakeholders, including brands," Carver added. "And truly, it is the concern of every citizen around the world." ☺

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