

History of the Cormo Breed and the American Cormo Sheep Association

By Sue Reuser

As I am winding down my involvement with Cormo sheep, I want to share all of the information that I have with others who are interested. I have been raising Cormo sheep for 24 years now and I still very pleased with them. I have also been able to supply many fiber artists with their awesome fleeces and many of them are very disappointed that they will no longer be able to get them here.

I will just make a few comments here. I've spent more than a full day going through ACSA records (there is a lot of them) and making copies of what I thought gave most information about the breed. I'll try to keep my words at a minimum and let you read directly the words from those who were involved.

Cormo sheep were first imported to the US by Travis Jones. He was a very active sheep and wool producer in the 1970s and highly respected within the industry. At that time there was a lot of wool produced on rangeland in the Western United States. You will be able to see that the purpose of the great expense and effort that Jones and later others made to import Cormo's, was to improve the wool production of their commercial range flocks. It is fortunate for us that some of these people were willing to form ACSA, start the registry and maintain purebred flocks. None of the people who bought the first imported sheep are currently raising purebred Cormo sheep but they passed the registry down and helped and encouraged others to raise purebred Cormo sheep.

It looks like it was about 1985 when the folks at Utah State U. started promoting Cormo sheep for the small farm fiber flocks. Cormo sheep have fit into that niche very well. That is where the majority of Cormo sheep are today however there are still commercial wool growers who are interested in using Cormo to improve their wool clips.

Where will the Cormo breed in the US and the ACSA go in the future? That will be up to others. I've been actively involved with ACSA since (I think it was 1993 but I don't want to go through stacks of papers again.) and I have always tried to uphold the principles of ACSA's original founders and registry. To me that registry is the most important thing we have and it's rules are very simple. In order to be registered, both of the sheep's parents must be in the register or come from ACSA's semen.

This was quoted from the letter with notes about the "first meeting of the American Cormo Sheep Assn,"

Breed standards are being patterned on the Australian program in which

selection is based solely on measured production of economical

characteristics. This will include individual ram fleece micron

testing and eventually individual fleece yield testing. The next directors meeting is scheduled in Denver July 1, 1978.

I was on the committee that made up the current ACSA "breed standards" but I have always voted against making up new standards for the breed based on other breeds and the US show system.

However, I think that I need to add that with all of the small size flocks in the US today the previous selection system will not work. Sheep with inferior characteristics should not be used for breeding. In 1985 ACSA was still promoting the same policy when they would answer inquires for information on the breed:

The Cormo association is small at this time, but the interest in the Cormo breed is soaring. The association has no written By-Laws, but there is a mutual agreement that the Cormo should not be promoted as a show sheep. The reason for this, is due to the desired effort to keep the breed as pure as possible. Registration fees are \$3.00 per animal,.. .

[Ian Downie -About Cormo 1976](#)

[The first ACSA Meeting](#)

[Travis Jones Article 1](#)

[Travis Jones Article 2](#)

[ACSA 1985 Correspondence 1](#)

[ACSA 1985 Correspondence 2](#)

[ACSA 1985 Correspondence 3](#)

[Australian Promotion](#)

[AU Brochure 1 \(there is no date but I think that it was the last produced\)](#)

[AU Brochure 2](#)

[AU Brochure 3](#)

The Cormo Sheep

The Cormo is from a system of breeding in which selection is based on scientific measurement of commercially desirable characteristics.

The criteria for selection are:

Clean fleece weight.

Fiber diameter (17-23 micron range).

Fast body growth rate, or body weight.

High fertility.

Scientific instruments and laboratory procedures are used to measure these characteristics, replacing the traditional subjective visual assessments. The results are stored and analyzed by computer. No pedigrees are kept. Sheep are numbered and computer management makes Cormo the most strictly scientific genetic improvement scheme in the industry's history.

In 1960 the owner of Dungrove, Ian Downie, was running a high quality flock of Superfine Saxon Merinos. Commercial considerations led him to two conclusions:

There was a need for a more fertile, higher wool producing and larger framed sheep

A trend would develop towards the purchase of wool according to objective measurement and breeding program should be instigated to meet this demand.

In seeking scientific help he learned of large scale breeding trials conducted at Trangie, New South Wales, Australia, by Dr Helen Newton-Taylor, chief geneticist with the Division of Animal Genetics of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization, in collaboration with Dr R.B. Dun and Dr F. Morley.

The Senior Sheep and Wool Officer of Tasmania's Department of Agriculture Mr B.C. Jefferies, devised a breeding program which was based on the Trangie experiments and designed to meet Mr Downie's requirements.

Stud Corriedale rams were crossed with 1200 Superfine Saxon Merino ewes and those progeny which met rigid selection criteria, assessed by objective measurement, became the Cormo ram breeding nucleus. The word Cormo is derived from letters from the names of the two parent breeds.

Since the initial cross-breeding in 1960, Dungrove has maintained a ram-breeding nucleus flock within its main commercial flock. The nucleus of 2000 ewes produces sires for both the nucleus and the commercial flock of 8000 ewes. No outside rams are introduced and those within the nucleus are culled rigorously for commercial faults.

Rams born in Tasmania in October (Southern Hemisphere spring) are tip shorn and weaned in January. They graze naturally all year before being shorn again in December, when body weights are measured and wool samples sent to a laboratory for assessment. When results are known, a final selection is made, based on:

Clean fleece weight;

Fiber diameter (21-23 microns);

Type of birth, with twins preferred;

Body weight.

The top 3 per cent of rams, assessed by these criteria, are retained for breeding. Selected rams remain active in the breeding nucleus for only two years, so there is a rapid turnover of genetically improving sires. Recent computer data shows the flock is continuing to improve genetically.

Ewes, born either into the ram nucleus flock or the commercial flock, are culled for obvious commercial faults. At the hogget shearing, those remaining are assessed for greasy fleece weight and fiber diameter. Animals failing to meet prescribed standards are eliminated. Each year the ewe yearlings from both flocks help to form the ram breeding nucleus.

Management of the flock at Dungrove complements the scientific culling program. Sheep are not housed, rugged or given supplementary feeding, although they graze from 610 to 1000 meters above sea level at an approximate latitude of 42 South where summers are hot and dry and winters cold and snowy. Annual rainfall averages 21 inches. Genetic defects are exposed and culled naturally in this environment, instead of being concealed by artificial pampering.

Scientific breeding has given the Cormo a remarkable range of commercial virtues, suited to both the wool and meat industries. These include:

Long staple, white high-yield wool

Soft dense fleece with exceptional consistency (90 percent within two microns of the average)

Resistance to fleece rot and mycotic dermatitis

Long and large carcasses with mature ewes weighing 140 - 165 lbs.

High fertility

Open faces

Easy management

Good herding instinct

Producing a finer fleece when crossed with a stronger breed, but retaining body size and fertility.

Cormo sheep were first introduced to the United States in 1976 when Travis Jones imported 12 bred ewes and 2 stud rams from I.K. Downie. Both carcass and wool traits are exceptional when Cormos are crossed with existing U. S. wool sheep. The Cormo is not being promoted as a show type sheep in the U.S., but rather as one of economic value.

In recent years Cormo fleeces have received high recognitions over all breeds at some of the nations largest wool shows. Hand spinners find it the most exciting of the fine wool breeds.