



Kentucky Proud alpaca producer provides Adventure Socks for U.S. troops

by chris aldrige, kentucky proud connection

When a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan or Iraq takes his or her boots off, that soldier might be wearing a pair of Kentucky Proud socks from Flaggy Meadow Fiber Works in Springfield.

The small fiber mill, the only one in the state, turns soft fleece sheared from alpacas into the yarn to make its new outdoor Adventure Sock. In less than a month, nearly 1,500 pairs of Flaggy Meadow's rugged yet comfortable socks have been sent to American troops serving in the Middle East through a grassroots volunteer organization called the Alpaca Sock Brigade.

In 4½ years, the Sock Brigade has sent more than 11,000 pairs of socks to soldiers in the field. The organization describes its effort as "a simple goal – warm feet for our troops in harm's way by way of our soft, luxurious alpaca socks!"

Before Flaggy Meadow got involved in May, the Sock Brigade was purchasing socks made in Peru. Then Flaggy Meadow co-owner Shawn Malloy gave Sock Brigade co-founder Randy Coleman a pair of his Adventure Socks to try.

"Randy called me up and said, 'Hey, I like your socks,'" Malloy said. "I mentioned to him that they're made in U.S. with fleece bought from small farms, and he said, 'Hmmm.'"

That struck a chord with Coleman, who owns an alpaca farm in Oregon along with his wife, Barbara. So Flaggy Meadow was announced as the official supplier of the Sock Brigade at the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association National Show and Auction in May in Denver.

The Sock Brigade collects tax-deductible donations of fleece, known in the industry as fiber, from alpaca farms across the country. Flaggy Meadow then pays a generous \$6 per pound to the Sock Brigade for the fiber.

"What makes my project special is I give them top dollar for the fiber, so it gives them more money to buy more socks," Malloy said. "No one is doing this anywhere else in the country; no one is paying \$6 a pound for it, either.

"We buy the fiber, make the socks, and send them back. It helps them out, it helps me out, and I give them a real good deal on socks."

Sock Brigade started with one soldier

The Colemans started the Sock Brigade in January 2007 when their son, Sgt. Michael Coleman, told his parents that his U.S. Army-issue socks didn't keep his feet warm while patrolling Baghdad in 20-degree nighttime temperatures. So he asked his parents to send alpaca socks for him and his buddies in his next care package.

When the Colemans found out there were 250 soldiers in their son's unit, they sent an email to 300 alpaca breeders across the country requesting donations to buy the socks. The response was overwhelming, and the Sock Brigade was born.

Flaggy Meadow has been working for two years on its Adventure Sock, which was officially introduced under the Royalty Fiber Farm brand earlier this year.

"I'm really excited that the Sock Brigade picked up our sock," Malloy said. "They could've picked any sock across the country.

"We like it because it's a way to support our troops by protecting their feet," he said, then joked: "Maybe I'll land a defense contract sometime."

Malloy supplements the fleece that he buys from the Sock Brigade with fiber from alpaca farms in Kentucky and across the country.



“My goal is to work with as many Kentucky farms as possible to supply us with the fiber,” Malloy said. “We’ve had three alpaca farms move near Springfield in the past couple of years. We have a herd of over 100 alpacas on our farm, and there’s 30 at one farm and 30 at another. With the other two already existing farms, that’s about 300 alpacas right there that I know of.”

“There are 500-600 alpacas in Marion and Washington counties right now, and I’m trying to buy as much fiber from them as possible. I’m also processing fiber from farms in Shelbyville, Covington, and Somerset, as well as all across the country.”

Because there are no sock makers in Kentucky, Flaggy Meadow outsources the production of Adventure Socks to small manufacturers in North Carolina and New England.

“But we manage the process from start to finish,” Malloy said. “We collect the fiber and wash and clean it to our specifications before we make the yarn. We make sure what goes in is good so it will come out good.”

The Sock Brigade is striving to supply every American soldier serving around the world with three pairs of Adventure Socks. The feedback so far has been positive.

“The guys really like these socks,” Malloy said of the soldiers. “If they wear cotton socks in the desert, their feet sweat and rub against the sock, which causes blisters.”

Malloy said 30 percent of human sweat comes through the feet. Adventure Socks are designed to keep your feet dry. Alpaca yarn wicks away moisture, and silver is added to help reduce foot odor and fungus.

“I’m wearing a pair right now and, at 94 degrees, my feet are very comfortable,” Malloy said. “I give them out to people, especially hikers, and I’m getting good feedback.”

One hiker told Malloy the Adventure Socks “are 10 times better than the best SmartWool hiking socks on the market.”

Another testimonial came from a waiter, who spends much of his work day on his feet. “He was overwhelmed, and said it’s the best pair of socks he’s ever worn,” Malloy said.

One of Malloy’s friends gave a pair to a U.S. Army officer at Fort Knox for Christmas. “He wore them on an 11-mile hike in January,” Malloy noted, “and he was the only one out of 102 to pass a foot check because his feet weren’t wet.”

Adventure Socks available in small stores and on the Internet

Malloy doesn’t plan on selling Adventure Socks in big retail chain stores. Instead, he is working exclusively with small businesses to distribute the socks, allowing them to buy the Kentucky Proud product wholesale and sell it at a profit.

“Working with the Sock Brigade is huge for us because of the awareness it is generating,” he said. “We’re actively setting up wholesale accounts right now because Kentucky has a lot of mom-and-pop stores out there that might like something unique to sell. I’ve visited a lot of them, peddling my socks, but I can’t get to them all.”

If you can’t find Adventure Socks in a store near you, you can order them online for \$25 per pair in two colors, tweed and charcoal. Log onto www.FlaggyMeadowFiberWorks.com and click on the “Mill Store” link.

If you know a soldier stationed in Afghanistan or Iraq who would like his or her unit to receive Adventure Socks, email the Sock Brigade at SockBrigade@BentStarProject.org with the soldier’s name, email address, and Army Post Office address for his or her unit. As funds allow, the Sock Brigade will send three pairs to every person in the unit.

Shawn Malloy with two pair of his Adventure Socks at his Flaggy Meadow Farm near Springfield. (Photo submitted)

Kentucky Proud receives funding from the Kentucky Agricultural Development Fund (KADF), which provides grants to diversify and modernize Kentucky’s farm economy. Kentucky Proud is administered by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture.



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