

Regional projects valuing wool in Europe

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Abstract

After decades of neglect of the wool industry in Europe, we see in the past few years the development of some regional projects valuing wool. The impetus for these projects comes rarely from the 'traditional' breeders who are unfortunately convinced of the insignificance of this raw material and mostly concerned about its rapid elimination. But this natural and renewable resource find a new interest among consumers concerned by the origin of raw materials for their clothing and home textiles (local production, non-use of non-renewable resources, specific identity, ...). The initiators of these projects are from the wool sector, the 'atypical' sheep breeders, some professional sectors away from these two worlds or even from the social economy. But we had to build up again a complex chain whose parts have gone away far from Europe due to delocalization, to give farmers the pride of this raw material and the basic knowledge necessary for its recovery, to recreate collective structures which only allow a efficiency. Coordination and exchange of experiences between regional groups is a major challenge for the coming years. As well as thoughts on the technical tools needed in the sector. Keep to each one its specific identity while sharing experience and skills is a long and difficult way but necessary for solid reconstruction and long-term industry. Four examples will be presented: • APPAM in the Alpes Maritimes, France valorisation of wool from 4 breeds: Brigasques into carpet, Mourerous, Préalpes and Mérinos d'Arles into knitting wool and knitting garments • Consorzio Biella the Wool Company, Italy Valorisation of wools from Piedmont and Abruzzo • Vielfacht der Kollektion, Germany Valorisation of the rare breeds Coburger Steinschaf and Alpines Steinschaf • FIWO, Switzerland Valorisation of Swiss wool in a wide range of products: insulation, bedding,... The different projects will be presented from several points of view: breeding, local economy, socio-economic conditions and environmental consequences.

Introduction

As coordinator of the association *ATELIER- Wools of Europe*, I will give you a little overview of initiatives all over Europe to make better use of wool.

ATELIER- Wools of Europe is an association. Members are from the whole wool sector: breeders, breeders' associations, shearers, craftspeople and small enterprises for washing, carding, spinning, weaving, knitting, some textile artists and museums, educational farms, historians and scientists.

Founded in France in 1989, the association is now present in ten European countries. Our activities: organisation of exchanges, visits and meetings, training courses, promotion of wool through exhibitions, events, educational activities to the general public. And at last, contacts with national and European institutions to promote and support this sector, relatively unknown.

Decades of neglect of the wool industry in Europe

In Europe, in 2011 there are more than 127 million sheep but hundreds of different breeds, not to mention the multiple crossings. The multiplicity of breeds results in a great diversity of types of wool. The total wool production in Europe is more than 260,000 tons in 2011. But differs from one breed to another, colour and fleece weight, fibre fineness, staple length, soft or rough...

In the past it was an essential raw material, but for decades wool knows a difficult situation.

- The breeders have virtually no information or training on wool, its quality, shearing conditions and collection. For them, the wool is a waste, bulky, and generating costs more than income.
- At the gathering, the circuits are complicated; a payment according to the quality is rare. The batches are often small, wool colours are mixed. Much European wool is exported greasy or just scoured without added value.
- With the regulation 1069/2009, the European Union has classified greasy wool as "an animal by-product of category 3". Collection and transport are now subject to a number of requirements.
- Since the years 1950, synthetic fibres dominate the market of the textile fibres. Wool represents less than 2% of all together, the synthetic fibres more than 60%.
- At the processing level, many small businesses processing local wool disappeared during the second half of the 20th century. Larger companies of northern France, Belgium, Great Britain or Italy closed or relocated in Eastern Europe and in Asia.

A new interest for this natural and renewable resource

But we see now some new elements.

- A new interest for local, natural resources and some concerns for distant transport,
- a demand for products with traceability,
- the recognition of the role of small processing facilities to operate more flexible than larger units,
- the problem of decrease of fossil resources (bases of synthetic fibres)
- the development of a "sustainable fashion", concerned by ecological and social terms in which the products are done
- an interest for rare breeds and safeguard of their specificities
- the concern for enhancing the value of all products of the sheep if agricultural premiums decrease and a demand for products from organic agriculture
- Finally, the issue of animal well-fare, shearing is a necessary care!

Here is the presentation of some initiatives in different regions to make a better use of wool. The initiators are sometimes from the wool sector, but often "atypical" sheep breeders, from professional sectors or even social sector.

They have:

- to reconstruct a complex industry with large links having disappeared in Europe,
- to restore the pride of the farmers producing this beautiful material and give them the technical knowledge essential to its development
- to recreate the common structures that allows efficiency.

Initiatives from sheep breeders associations

- The association "the Caussenarde" was founded in 1998. Its objective is to promote the sheep *Caussenarde* thanks to woollen products of quality and to build a network for local processing and sale. In spring 2011, the breeders of the association collected 660 kg of wool and sorted it, wool was scoured and processed in mattresses, but also carded for duvets and spinners association. A small part was processed in yarn. The action continues.
- Another association, just informal. About 10 sheep breeders of **Merinos of Arles** in the South-East of France. For each of them, a few hundred fleeces shorn each year are not a batch of sufficient size to be processed with quality at an affordable cost. They therefore create a pool but with a requirement that each sorts the fleeces of good quality with the aim of a homogeneous global batch. In June 2013, the lots were grouped and a truck carried all in Italy. The verdict of the wool experts: the batch is of 1st quality! Wool is already scoured and combed. The yarn will be process in the autumn. Each of the breeders works on its marketing plan and chooses colours of the balls or will continue the processing of the yarn in knitwear or fabrics.
- The APPAM is an association of breeders in the Alpes-Maritimes, founded in 2002 to provide solutions to the problem by wolves. Since 2006, the association tries to add value to meat and wool. A part of wool is produced by breeds **Mourerous** and **Préalpes South**, their crossing with each other and with Merinos of Arles. In 2012, eight breeders of APPAM collected six tons of wool for processing them in Biella, Piémont in Italy. The wools are rather thin (28 microns average), soft, and present a very beautiful character of bulking. The breeders therefore decide to produce finished goods from long wool (30% of the batch). It can be combed, without any vegetal matter and allows the finest possible yarn. The quality of the yarn obtained, allowed to weave plaids, fabric and scarves. The breeders have still to find a good use short wool, which represent the most important part of the batch.

Some initiatives from associations of rare or minor breeds

- In the Alpes-Maritimes, a hardy breed with low numbers, the **Brigasque** gives a cheese of excellent quality but its wool has no use. In June 2009, a small group of breeders brought 1.5T of this wool to the Company Tessile Crabolu in Sardinia, for making wool carpets with original designs. Selling carpets give to the breeders a substantial income and thanks to this promotion, the demand for the breed increased. The operation continues for 4 years
- **The Alpine Steinschaf** breed had almost disappeared in years 1980. A group of Austrian and German breeders restarted the breed and wool program contributed a lot. Since 2004 each year, the breeders bring their fleeces to the General Assembly; two tons of wool are then graded. Then the whole batch is sent for washing, carding, spinning, weaving and knitting in a network of small German and Austrian companies. The breeders get the finished products and sell them themselves.
- In Catalan Pyrenees, the small **Xisqueta** breed is very well suited to the mountainous conditions but its wool found no use. With the enthusiasm of a small group it became possible to use a part of the wool in cooperation with craftspeople and well known Catalan designers.

Initiatives from regional institutions

- **Region Limousin** has launched for several years a development program of wool from Limousin. Improving the wool produced, professional training shearing and sorting, setting up partnerships with regional textile industries (felt, bedding), organisation of events as Journées Nationales de la Laine in Felletin. An original initiative in partnership with Gites de France, is the label "Wool Cocoon". It has been created for B&B offering mattresses and blankets to their hosts but also information on sheep breeding and craftspeople working in the region.
- In Belgium, a local office of development of the **Province of Luxembourg** set up since 2010 a small sector wool. Among many activities, promotion and events: an annual gathering of Walloon wool quality which allowed the processing of 100% Walloon wool duvets.

Private initiatives or cooperatives

- In Belgium, near of Namur, a small spinning, **Filature du Hibou** opened in 2009. The machines are manufactured in Canada and can process batches of wool from 3 to 30 kg, from washing to spinning. They can process mohair, alpaca, fine wools and coarser fibres. A good tool for many small breeders in Belgium, but also a tool for sampling for bigger companies and a place for a technical training for carding and spinning.
- In Ardèche, the **cooperative Ardelaine** has created forty jobs in collecting wool of the Massif Central, processing them in bedding articles, clothes and knitwear and an important activity with a museum and pedagogical activities. The cooperative also works in partnership with several enterprises for washing wool, collecting, spinning and a part of the knitting.

Economical and social challenges

In **Switzerland, FIWO** is a company founded in 2005. It collects about 250 tons of greasy wool (about 800 tons are produced in the country). Sorting fleeces separates the qualities and a part then goes to the international market. The rest is washed in Belgium, because no scouring facilities are now in Switzerland. Then wool is processed locally in a wide range of thermal and acoustic insulation for building, bedding, knitting yarn or felt objects. Wool wastes are turned into fertilizer pellets available in garden centres. Thirty persons work there, some of them in the context of social integration programs for long-term unemployed or disabled persons.

New professional training courses

- Since 2007, a wool workshop occurs each year in the **CFPPA of Merle, in Provence**, a school for transhumant shepherds. They can get basic knowledge about wool and care to be brought to fleeces throughout the year and when shearing. Movies, pictures and samples provide information on the steps of processing and the many possible end products.
- **In the department of Lot** in 2011 and in **the Bouches-du-Rhône** in 2012, "wool" training courses have been organised for sheep breeders, with the support of training funds for farmers.
- In April 2013, the association organized, in partnership with the National Institute of Métiers d'Art of Paris, a Masterclass "Wool" on the Bergerie Nationale de Rambouillet, in the framework of the European program LEONARDO. Fifteen young textile designers came from Spain, France, Slovakia and Ireland for 8 days to study wool, its properties and its uses.

After two days of training on the wool produced in Europe and its specificities, various professors gave some particular technical teaching: felt, mattresses, dyeing, recycling ...

Cross border initiatives

- Since 2011 several associations, some regional organisations (natural parks, local communities) are involved in setting various actions promoting wool in **the Massif des Pyrénées**. In France, in the Hautes-Pyrénées, the Ariège and the Haute-Garonne; in Spain, in Catalonia and Aragon. These activities set relationship between breeders and small local processors. The passing on of a small spinning mill in Ariège by the retiring owner to some young trainees is going on. Cross-border exchanges with Spain are numerous: fleeces come from Spain to France for processing, pedagogic bilingual tools with a " wool suitcase " ...
- The "Know Sheep" European program in the Islands of the Baltic Sea also develop actions for promoting local wool in Estonia and Finland: creation of new felt products, cooperation with designers, exchanges of know-how, crafts markets and even the creation of a new small spinning mill on the island of Saaremaa.

Exchanges, coordination and promotion

Of course I am not able to speak about all existing initiatives and many projects are emerging. And all these initiatives, often with young and enthusiastic people are very encouraging for those who have experienced a rather sad situation thirty years ago!

But the coordination and exchange of experiences between regional groups and all these initiatives is a major challenge for the coming years.

As well as thoughts about the necessary technical tools: machines with appropriated size, collection and grading centres, organisation of transport...

The European network needs to be reinforced: strengthen the links between farmers and processors, make it known to European organisations.

Keep each its specific identity while sharing skills and competences is a long and difficult way, but necessary for a strong and long-term reconstruction of the whole sector.

Sheep are shorn each year, every year fleeces fall.

Fabulous wealth of this renewable resource!

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Decades of neglect of the wool industry in Europe

- Sheep breeders knew very few about wool
- Wool marketing difficulties
- In Europe, wool is classified as a by-product
- First, the synthetic fibres!
- The massive relocation of the processing companies



A new interest for this natural and renewable resource



- A natural and renewable material
- Traceability of the processing
- Guarantee of origin, regional label
- Originality of the products
- Ethical fashion
- Animal welfare

Initiatives from breeders associations

- Association « La Caussearde » in Lot (south-west France)
- About 10 breeders of Mérinos d'Arles sheep, between two regions, PACA et Rhône-Alpes
- A sheep breeders association in Alpes-Maritimes (south-east France)



Initiatives from breeders of endangered or minor breeds

- *Brigasque* in Alpes-Maritimes (France)



- *Alpine Steinschaf* in Germany and Austria



- *Xisqueta* in Catalan Pyrenees



Regional initiatives

- In Limousin, a label « wool cocoon » for B&B with upholstery in wool
- In Belgium, processing of duvets 100% wool from Wallonia



Private initiatives or cooperatives

- La Filature du Hibou in Belgium: a « mini » spinning mill for small breeders
- The cooperative ARDELAINÉ in Ardèche: upholstery, clothes, visits and rural development



Economical and social challenges

The company *FIWO* in Switzerland

- 250 tons greasy wool collected each year
- Processing of insulation, felts, duvets, mattresses, yarns....
- International marketing
- Social enterprise



New professional training courses

- Courses « wool » in CFPPA du Merle , for young shepherds
- Courses « wool » for sheep breeders from Bouches du Rhône and Lot
- Masterclass Wool in Rambouillet for textile designers from Spain, France, Ireland, Slovakia



Crossborder initiatives

- Group in Pyrénées, between France and Spain
- « Know Sheep », in the Baltical Islands, in Estonia and Finland

Marchez avec nous !

Participez au renouveau de la laine de pays !

Avec
L'association Halte Laaa
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Aidez nous à réaliser pour vous des chaussettes "100% Pyrénées"

Comment faire :

Nous vous proposons de souscrire pour l'achat d'une ou plusieurs paires de chaussettes en laine. Cela nous permettra de réaliser la transformation de la laine de pays (races Aurouise et Lourdaise) et de lancer la fabrication. Il nous faut payer : les tondeurs, la laine aux éleveurs, les coûts de transport vers les opérateurs de lavage, de filature et enfin le tricotage. Nous devons attendre d'avoir un minimum de souscriptions pour lancer la fabrication (250 paires). Nous récolterons la laine l'automne prochain pour livrer vos chaussettes en printemps 2014 ! Nous vous tiendrons informés de l'avancé de notre projet commun. Un grand merci d'avance !



Exchanges, coordination and promotion

- Breeders' visit in wool spinning mills
- Processors trips in farms
- An exhibition « Wools of Europe »
- Actions at the European level

ATELIER-Wools of Europe

