

Tour covers bridges and alpaca farms

By Denise Ruttan

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Greg Schneider is passionate about two things these days — alpacas and buying local.

The Scio-area alpaca farmer is working to organize a consortium of growers into an agritourism circuit.

A Web site has been started already at www.alpaca-tour.com, linking a self-guided tour of covered bridges with visits to three alpaca ranches in the Thomas Creek Valley area.

Schneider would like to see the tour expanded to other farms. He has been talking with several farms and chambers of commerce that have expressed interest in the project.

"I've been thinking for a long time that there are many wonderful products produced here in our local area. Every farm is unique," Schneider said. "One of the issues we've had is how can all of us market our products and do it in a way that benefits everyone."

Schneider would like to see the tour focus especially on Thomas Creek Valley-grown products.

"It's amazing the diversity we have here and how few people know about it," Schneider said. "We could work together and promote it, together with our covered bridges and beautiful scenery. There's no reason why we shouldn't promote agritourism."

With his wife, Wendy Greenwald, Schneider has been raising alpacas at his farm for about 10 years now. The couple have two grown children.

Schneider had always wanted to be a farmer. When Greenwald and Schneider were looking to transition into a quieter way of life, they researched many types of farming. Schneider was looking for something that did not require him to slaughter the animal, and could be environmentally friendly.

Alpacas fit the bill.

"Once an alpaca looks you in the eyes, it's over," Schneider said.

Schneider was born in Texas and spent most of his life in South Dakota. He moved to Oregon about 20 years ago and to Scio about 10 years ago.

Schneider was a union organizer for about 20 years. Wendy Greenwald works for the state as an administrative law judge for the employee relations board in Salem.



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Wendy Greenwald shows off a bag of raw fiber that came directly from alpacas at Sylvan Skies in the Scio area. The fiber is sent to small mills to be crafted into yarn.

If you go

Learn more about the tour to see covered bridges and alpacas in the Scio area, go to www.alpaca-tour.com

For more information or to visit Sylvan Skies Alpaca Farm:

Greg Schneider and Wendy Greenwald
40980 Rodgers Mountain Loop in Scio (503)
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www.sylvanskies.com

Greenwald helps out at the farm on evenings and weekends. She knits and does felting with alpaca fiber. Her handmade products are sold at the farm store.

The farm started with two pregnant female alpacas. A couple of years later, they bought a couple more.

"It started out almost as a hobby," Schneider said.

Since he quit his city job and started working at the farm full time, Schneider has been putting his labor-organizing skills into practice promoting his love of alpacas. He was a board member of the Alpaca Fiber Cooperative of North America. He hosted a National Alpaca Farm Day visit at his farm last weekend, Sept. 27-28. Buses of tour groups ranging from school-age children to senior citizens have visited the farm in the past.

Schneider loves introducing new people to the alpaca's teddy-bear charm and the green vistas of the farm on Rodgers Mountain Loop.

When raising alpacas, two kinds of businesses make money for the farm — breeding stock and harvesting fiber.

The fiber is soft, similar to cashmere. The fiber does not itch like wool and does not have lanolin, an oily substance.

Alpacas and the fiber they produce have become popular in recent years. Five to six years ago, there was one small fiber mill in Oregon; now, there are five to six. Membership in the national alpaca association has grown tremendously.

"It's amazing how fast it's growing," Schneider said.

Sylvan Skies Farm is 45 acres, but only five acres are dedicated to alpacas. There are about 20 to 30 alpacas at the farm now.

Alpacas are foragers and are cousins of giraffes and camels. At an average of 150 pounds, they are half the size of llamas. When speaking, alpacas make a quiet noise that sounds like humming.

Originally from South America, alpacas form close bonds with their herds. They live for about 20 years. Females are pregnant for about 52 weeks.

Shy around visitors, they take time to get to know.

At Sylvan Skies, all the alpacas are named after stars or objects in the sky, Schneider said.

Schneider hopes to make a trial run at the farm tour project and agritourism consortium.

"I'd like people to spend an afternoon or day or two, see what we do, spend some money and support our local economy and see the beautiful area we live in and the products we produce," Schneider said.

The first steps have been taken and the budding consortium is looking to build from there, Schneider said.

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