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ASI Small & Midsize Mill Meetup Conference Report
July 28–29, 2026 | Sheridan, Wyoming

Overview

The American Sheep Industry Association (ASI) Small & Midsize Mill Meetup was held July 28–29, 2026, in Sheridan, Wyoming, bringing together wool mill owners and operators from across the United States with equipment manufacturers, speakers from across the globe, and members of the ASI Wool Council. The event was designed to address the challenges and opportunities facing the nation's small and midsize wool-processing sector and to identify strategies for strengthening domestic wool processing capacity.

The event was the result of an industry-wide effort launched in 2025 to strengthen domestic small and mediums size mill wool processing and address the unique challenges facing America's mills. ASI conducted surveys, virtual meetings and interviews with small and midsize mills to better understand their needs. Five recurring challenges emerged: marketing wool, maintaining a workforce, equipment, access to capital, and scouring. These five areas formed the foundation of the meetup's educational sessions and discussions.

Approximately 25 owners and operators of small and midsize mills attended. A significant concern expressed throughout the meeting was the level of demand facing the sector, with nearly all participating small and midsize mills reporting backlogs ranging from several months to as much as two years.

Marketing Strategy and Building Demand

Marketing was one of the primary areas of focus. Anne Merrow of Long Thread Media provided an overview of the fiber arts industry and discussed opportunities for wool mills to connect with consumers. The global fiber arts industry is projected to grow by 6 to 8 percent, with approximately 25 percent of that growth expected to come from the United States. Natural fibers are also experiencing growth, driven by consumer interest in sustainability, health and wellness, and authentic connections to products.

The presentation emphasized that different segments of the fiber arts market have distinct needs. More experienced knitters tend to move toward natural, non-superwash yarns and are interested in a variety of breeds, while crocheters often favor cotton. Weavers have interest in cotton and some wool, particularly yarn available on cones. Although the average age of a crafter is approximately 60, that age has remained stable, indicating that younger consumers continue to

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enter the market. Younger crafters are particularly interested in authenticity, wellness and sustainable materials.
The discussion also reinforced the importance of storytelling and community. Consumers increasingly want to understand the story behind a product and feel connected to the people and businesses producing it. Social media, direct email marketing, YouTube and platforms such as Ravelry provide opportunities for mills to educate consumers and build those connections. "People don't want to buy something. They want to buy into something." Anne emphasized. People are looking for connections and being part of something. Anne also stated, "Fiber arts are the antidote to AI." Crafters and buyers of wool want something real, so stay away from using AI in marketing.

Christa Rochford of the American Wool Council discussed efforts to increase consumer awareness and demand for U.S. wool. The American Wool Council identifies four primary target consumer audiences: the Sophisticate (consumers who focus on design and sustainability), the Pathfinder (who are athletic and focus on performance), the Makers (crafters looking for local, quality products) and the Authentic (consumers looking for sustainable, authentic products). By focusing on these types of consumers, American Wool is able to maximize it's efforts.

The presentation also highlighted the importance of a strong online presence. Sixty percent of consumers will abandon a poor website, while 70 percent will abandon a website with too many out-of-stock products. Mills were encouraged to focus on building loyalty, connection and trust. The American Wool logo licensing program is also available to mills and provides an opportunity for brands using American wool to communicate that connection to consumers. If mills are interested in this program, contact christa@sheepusa.org. ASI's Small and Midsize Mill Directory (on sheepusa.org) and the American Wool website (americanwool.org) also provide resources for connecting consumers with mills and American wool products.

Hannah Paquette of Pacific Northwest Fiber Connect discussed the potential of regional branding and collaboration. The organization currently connects 27 mills across three states and is working to create a regional identity that connects consumers with farms and mills. Through a feasibility study, they found that gathering producers and developing infrastructure was needed to gain a larger, more impactful identity. The PNW Fiber Connect is demonstrating that regional collaboration can help individual businesses gain visibility, develop infrastructure, improve accessibility and create stronger connections throughout the supply chain. "To support supply from the ground up, you need to grow community and collaboration." Hannah emphasized. Hannah's advice included: (1) be willing to share your story and provide connection for consumers, and (2) know your goals and who you're marketing to, whether it's a producer, spinner, or consumer.

Suggestions from others included:

- Using paid ads through Meta
- The importance of creating good, organic content

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- Work and advertise with someone people trust
- If selling wool pellets as a fertilizer or soil amendment, your product must be licensed in any state you are selling in
- Focus your efforts to be most effective
- For podcasts, focus on the story and not an agenda
- Pinterest is an important media for young people and women, however, images are easily separated from their original source

Workforce Development and Succession Planning

Workforce availability continues to be a significant challenge for small and midsize mills. A roundtable discussion with several mills provided practical strategies for recruiting, retaining and developing employees. These mills are using:

- Flexible schedules such as long operating hours on certain days, non-traditional schedules, and flexible hours to meet employee needs
- Recruit skilled workers from other industries such as paper mills
- Cross-train employees in various areas of the mill to maximize overall productivity of the mill

Mountain Meadow Wool is now in it's third year operating their SHEAR Internship Program. College students apply through Handshake and are matched with work based on their degrees and interests. Interns provide the mill with seasonal labor while exposing students to the wool industry and developing a knowledgeable workforce for the future. They work with the local college to provide cost-effective housing for the interns.

Battenkill Fiber Mill presented its approach to succession planning. Beginning several years ago, the business identified two employees interested in becoming owners and developed a gradual transition plan. With a well thought, written transition plan, the incoming owners receive increasing responsibility through three stages: Lead (the original owner leads), Follow (the original owner allows the new owners to operate but provides guidance as needed) and Get Out of the Way (fully allow the new owners to operate the business). This approach is intended to provide training and accountability while creating a seamless transition for customers and employees.

Other suggestions regarding workforce included:

- Ensure changes in the wool or product are clearly communicated as it moves through processing
- Choose where a specific employee can do the most good for you
- Use electronic payroll systems for efficiency and to help maintain records
- Know the laws around employees, labor, and workman's comp
- Have an employee handbook that covers benefits, termination, etc.
- If you have limited scouring, consider using Chargeurs top or Bollman/Crescent scouring

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- Keeping good records is essential for terminations, injuries and more
- If an injury happens, the owner needs to know and contact workman's comp immediately
- Younger generations often do not want to work in one place forever, so sharing how the skills learned in the mill can transfer to other jobs and why that role is valuable, is important

Mountain Meadow Wool Mill Tour

A tour of Mountain Meadow Wool provided attendees with an opportunity to see a successful midsize wool processing operation in action. While the mill uses a custom scouring train (which requires a minimum 50-pound lot due to the cleaning required between lots), the mill also uses outside scouring and combing services to expand its processing capacity. They now provide two lines of service, one focused on custom processing and one on larger, traceable blends. The mill also maintains an in-house dye laboratory capable of producing exact colors for custom contract skein dyeing.

Traceability is another important component of the mill's business model. Approximately 90 percent of the wool purchased by Mountain Meadow Wool comes from within 100 miles of the mill. The mill produces traceable blends from multiple ranches, reducing the risk associated with promoting wool from a single ranch if a raw wool quality issue arises. The concept also demonstrated how regional wool systems could potentially gather wool from producers, process it at a regional mill and return finished products.

One of the most significant operational lessons from the tour was the importance of environmental control. Maintaining approximately 70 percent humidity has been one of the most important improvements for yarn quality. Consistent moisture helps reduce static, particularly during processes like combing. The mill uses multiple humidification methods to maintain its processing environment including whole building humidifiers, antistatic bars, strategically placed small humidifiers, and hand-held spray bottles.

The mill also emphasized the value of wool preparation before processing. Mountain Meadow re-skirts fleeces before scouring to remove dirt and contamination. As Ben Hostetler explained, "Every pound that is not skirted becomes a pound that still has to be processed through scouring, carding and combing."

Equipment and Processing Solutions

Equipment manufacturers and experienced mill operators provided insight into technological advances and practical processing considerations.

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Representatives from Ramella presented several equipment innovations designed to improve the efficiency, precision, safety and flexibility of wool processing. Features of the carder include a durable steel frame, replaceable components, rigid wire rollers for longer life and easier cleaning, adjustable sliver twist, digital controls and enhanced safety features. The automatic feeder uses sensors to accurately measure fiber weight and automatically stops when the target weight is reached, while its independent design reduces interference from machine vibrations. The modern pin drafter offers faster operation, lower maintenance, active cleaning brushes and sensors that can detect issues such as wrapped wire, while programmable settings allow the machine to stop after a specified length of fiber is processed.

Ramella also highlighted advances in spinning technology. A 24-spindle machine with double drafting can produce a wider range of yarn weights and may improve processing efficiency and yarn quality. The spindle machine reduces friction and yarn tension, helping create softer yarn and reduce breakage, while operating at speeds of up to 800 yards per minute. Digital controls allow operators to monitor speed, twist and yarn diameter, use preset settings for different yarn types, and save customized parameters to reproduce previous yarns consistently. Finally, a prototype Rug Yarn Master, an independent machine designed to process a variety of fibers into rug yarn with adjustable twist is in development.

Belfast Mini Mills also shared their machinery advancements. As scouring is the biggest issue worldwide, Belfast Mini Mills is currently discussing how to bridge the gap between cottage industry and industrial scale. One option may be to develop a larger scouring unit that also provides the ability to physically manipulate the scouring in order to meet different wool types and needs. Additionally, Belfast can now run diagnostics remotely.

Eric Anderson of Pendleton Woolen Mills provided a detailed discussion on carding and emphasized its importance in producing quality yarn. He noted that challenging wool blends often reveal problems in the carding process. Proper carding requires balancing processing speed and equipment must be matched to the fiber being processed. Fine fibers, for example, may require newer carding cloth than coarser fibers. Anderson also shared, “card clothing is like tires on your car. If you put on all-season radial tires, they work for a lot of conditions. If you put on a middle-of-the-road carding cloth, you can work with a lot of types of wool.”

Regular maintenance was also emphasized, including grinding cards approximately every two years and stripping machines at regular production intervals. Operators can tell when maintenance is required by looking at the webs and if depth is remaining. Cloth supplies include Biotti (Italy), Rebtex (U.S.), RMO (Italy), Haungers (Nederlands). Installers include Montaleone and Graph Metallic. Linseed oil is recommended when winding flexible wire, but never use chemical detergents for cleaning.

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Accessing Capital and Business Planning

Capital requirements and business planning were another major focus.

Ed Crowley of Southeast Missouri State University shared business planning and entrepreneurship strategies, emphasizing that cash flow is the lifeblood of a business, yet it is often the least-planned component of a business operation. Agricultural businesses, including wool mills, are particularly capital intensive, making realistic planning essential.

A strong business plan can help a mill identify capital and cash needs, establish credibility with potential funding sources and clarify its business model. However, a business plan cannot compensate for poor execution or an unsound business model. Key questions include identifying the customer, understanding why the customer will buy, identifying competitors, determining production and distribution methods, establishing margins, determining startup cash requirements and planning for growth.

Patty Sanville discussed National Sheep Industry Improvement Center (NSIIC) Grants. The NSIIC's mission is to strengthen and enhance the production and marketing of sheep and sheep products and improve infrastructure within the U.S. sheep industry. Grants average approximately $29,000, although applicants may request any amount. Applications are evaluated on financial feasibility, business soundness, management ability, potential industry impact, industry commitment and overall impact. Applicants can only apply twice for a certain project and grants cannot cover permanent machinery, but can be used for upgrades.

USDA Rural Development Office representative also discussed potential funding sources. The Value-Added Producer Grants, the Rural Energy for America Program and Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant programs are particularly applicable to mills. Attendees were encouraged to sign up for GovDelivery notifications to learn when grant opportunities become available.

Insurance was also a topic of discussion. Many mills present have created a separate LLC to obtain liability coverage. Possible insurance carriers included: EMC Manufacturing Insurance, Hub International, Farm Credit, American National / Farm Family, and Farm Bureau. The USDA Risk Management Agency can also help with information. It was noted that coverage may not include equipment, so be sure to check and fully understand your coverage. Often, mills must have regular insurance, workman’s comp and disability, and family medical leave.

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Scouring Challenges and Solutions

Scouring remains one of the most significant bottlenecks for small and midsize mills. A roundtable discussion between several midsize and small mills demonstrated that mills are using a variety of approaches depending on their size, equipment and available infrastructure.

Midsize mills present often use scouring trains while smaller mills use sinks with baskets and/or modified washing machines. One mill, for example, uses a washing machine with the agitator removed and processes approximately nine pounds per cycle.

Proper detergent levels, water temperature and pH were also discussed. Mills emphasized that wool must not remain tacky or sticky after scouring and drying because this can create processing problems. A pH of approximately 9–9.5 was identified as a target range for detergents that specify that operating range. A tankless water heater was recommended- to obtain high enough temperatures, they suggested calling the water heater company and obtaining a re-programed chip.

Drying methods varied between air-drying, using laundry mat dryers, and using commercial wool dryers. Several mills also use a picker before scouring and a de-duster after scouring (after both in-house scouring and after scouring at larger processors).

Effluent was also discussed. It was noted that, if a leach field is used for wastewater, the suspended dirt will eventually plug it and cause issues.

The group also discussed lanolin separation. A smaller lanolin separator was estimated at approximately $80,000 for equipment, with an additional $300,000 in setup costs, and would require approximately 2,000 gallons of effluent per day. A separator must also be capable of handling dirt, grease and water and must remain hot to effectively separate lanolin.

Priorities for the Future

The final portion of the meetup focused on identifying the most important needs for supporting the small and midsize mill sector. Attendees ranked potential areas for future action, including:

1. Additional conferences/meetings
2. A communication hub
3. Technical assistance
4. Designs for scouring equipment
5. Finished products
6. An enhanced national directory
7. Consumer marketing
8. Regional marketing groups
9. Wool pellets
10. Workforce training
11. Pricing guidance
12. AI-guided raw wool sorting

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The two highest-priority needs identified by attendees were communication and technical support. Participants expressed strong interest in continuing future mill meetups and developing a centralized communication hub that could facilitate information sharing, problem solving and connections across the industry. Additionally, mills are in need of precise technical support to help them run more efficiently and increase productivity.

Conclusion

The 2026 ASI Small & Midsize Mill Meetup provided a valuable forum for bringing together the people who are building and sustaining domestic wool-processing capacity. The event moved beyond identifying challenges and provided practical examples of how mills are addressing marketing, labor, equipment, capital and scouring issues.

Perhaps most importantly, the meetup reinforced that small and midsize mills do not have to address these challenges independently. Continued communication, regional collaboration, technical assistance and industry-wide support can help individual businesses become stronger while building a more resilient domestic wool-processing infrastructure.

The priorities identified by attendees provide a clear direction for future ASI efforts. Continued mill meetups, a centralized communication hub and expanded technical support could help maintain the momentum generated by the 2026 event and further connect producers, processors, equipment manufacturers and consumers throughout the American wool supply chain.

"This gathering was a valuable reminder that we are not simply individual mills competing for the same wool supply — we are part of a larger network. And that network is considerably stronger than any one of us alone." accentuated Mary Jeanne Packer, chair of the ASI Wool Council Small & Midsize Mill Task Force and owner of Battenkill Fiber.