

## RINKER ROCK CREEK RANCH (RRCR) STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026

### Introduction

Society benefits when academic researchers have regular and close engagement with managers and other professionals that face genuine problems (Schneiderman 2018). At RRCR, we seek to integrate academic pursuits that maximize the value of rangeland research to society in a real-world natural resource setting. We seek to identify applications and solutions to real challenges in the use and management of rangeland resources. Applied research aims to solve specific natural resource, agricultural, or integrated challenges through direct experimentation. Basic research deepens our understanding of process within a system and can help inform beneficial applications. Our approach to integration of basic and applied research is encompassed by a hybrid model in which we collaborate with community partners from industry, land management agencies, and conservation entities (Fig. 1).

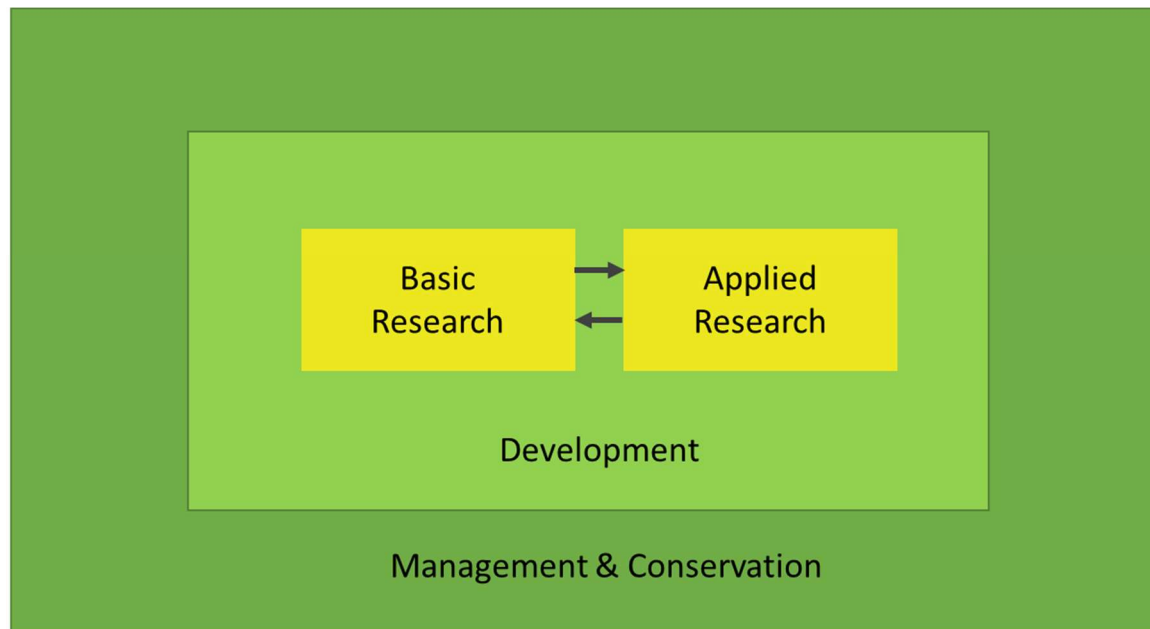


Fig. 1. The Ecological Model of Research and Development (modified from Schneiderman 2013). This model integrates basic and applied research within a shared environment for development of practices within natural resource management and conservation.

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## The Planning Process

In 2019, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by the University of Idaho and the Rinker Rock Creek Ranch (RRCR) Advisory Board (hereafter, the Board). This MOU established the relationship between the University of Idaho and the Board, which comprised individuals appointed by and representing the Wood River Land Trust, an Idaho non-profit corporation; The Nature Conservancy, a District of Columbia non-profit corporation; The Idaho Cattle Association, an Idaho non-profit corporation; the Idaho Rangeland Resources Commission, an agency of the State of Idaho; the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, an agency of the State of Idaho; and the Idaho Soil & Water Conservation Commission, an agency of the State of Idaho. This MOU also established the need to develop and implement a Strategic Plan to guide research, education, outreach, recreational use and related management activities at RRCR. The MOU outlined that the Board should be engaged for advice and assistance in developing, implementing and evaluating a program of work as captured in a Strategic Plan, and that the primary focus of collaboration between UI and the Board include the development of a 5-year Strategic Plan for the Ranch, using as a reference the project plan developed under the 2016 MOU. In 2020, Ranch personnel initiated the strategic planning process as directed by the 2019 MOU, which directs:

*“Develop a five-year strategic plan for the Ranch, using as a reference the project plan developed under the 2016 MOU. The strategic plan will address the collaborative priorities 2-8, below, shall comply with the GRP (Grassland Reserve Program) Easements and address both fee lands and public land leases held by the Ranch, including native range, seeded pastures and irrigated pastures.”*

There are two Grassland Reserve Program Conservation Easements that cover 10,317 acres of the total 10,353 acres of private land at RRCR. Relevant text from those documents regarding permitted activities, restricted activities, and other regulations are attached to this plan. The Easement covers all of the private ground, except Rock Creek and Glendale Roads and several small building and parking areas.

The RRCR overall strategic planning effort is guided by the following principles formulated through discussions with and feedback from UI Deans and RRCR Advisory Board members, along with information garnered from similar research stations and large-scale land management projects nationally:

- Create a nationally renowned, collaborative and interdisciplinary, prestigious platform for research, outreach, and education centered on productive and sustainably-managed, multi-use rangelands
- Create a legacy of accumulated knowledge needed to maintain environmental conditions and ecological processes that support food production, air, water, and soil quality, wildlife habitat, and human health
- Engage a diversity of stakeholders in the planning and implementation of rangeland research, outreach, education, and related management activities

This Strategic Plan was finalized in 2021 and will be revised with additional feedback from Advisory Board members beginning in 2026.

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### Acknowledgements and Assumptions

We would like to acknowledge our current limitations as they relate to the implementation of this Strategic Plan. Achieving all the outcomes listed within will require participation of the Advisory Board and stakeholders. Funding will be a critical piece in implementing the goals laid out in this plan. This Plan assumes we will have improved access to resources as well as the resolve and commitment of U of I leadership and faculty over time to achieve these objectives. Continued representation and support from the Advisory Board and working groups as active partners will be essential. We have refrained from listing specific timelines for deliverables because of the collaborative nature of these outcomes and the need to secure additional funding before committing to a specific timeline for many items. Our intent is that this 5-year plan will lay important groundwork from which we will build in the future, therefore many of the efforts described in this plan will be ongoing.

### Vision (from 2019 MOU):

*The Parties agree to collaborate in good faith at the Rinker Rock Creek Ranch to protect the Conservation Values and establish a program of research, education and outreach focused on sustainable rangeland management in the heart of Idaho where ranching, conservation, and recreation intersect. The facility will host innovative, interdisciplinary and collaborative research and management activities addressing important and pressing challenges impacting ranching and conservation on western rangelands. The Ranch will provide opportunities for public access and recreation and will serve as a podium for education on Idaho rangelands.*

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**List of abbreviations**

CALS	College of Agricultural and Life Sciences
CNR	College of Natural Resources
CWMA	Cooperative Weed Management Association
GRP	Grassland Conservation Program
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
RRCR	Rinker Rock Creek Ranch
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
UI	University of Idaho
WRLT	Wood River Land Trust

**Strategic Direction #1**

**Enhance research capacity**

Goals:

- Integrate basic and applied science to enhance understanding of impacts of rangeland practices on dynamics in the sagebrush steppe ecosystem
- Increase use of research results, data, and related tools
- Establish a nationally recognized program of research that facilitates understanding of working landscapes and ecosystem processes
- Monitor populations of known sensitive species

Intended Outcomes:

- Increased number and diversity of research projects
- Make monitoring and research data widely available
- Develop studies that identify starting conditions for process-level research
- Provide long-term context and deep knowledge of sagebrush steppe for researchers working on shorter-term projects

Goal 1: Integrate basic and applied science to enhance understanding of impacts of rangeland practices on dynamics in the sagebrush steppe ecosystem

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Increase distribution of requests for proposals from a diversity of sponsoring agencies	CALS and CNR Associate Dean of Research; U of I Office of Research and Economic Development; The Rangeland Center, RRCR Research Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased number of research proposals submitted to sponsoring agencies that include activities at RRCR</li> </ul>
B. Enhance support tools for researchers	CALS and CNR Associate Deans of Research; Dir of Idaho Agricultural Experiment Station; RRCR Operations Manager; Advisory Board and partners; Northwest Knowledge Network; CALS/CNR Development Directors; RRCR Research Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop physical infrastructure that facilitates research activity and helps meet long-term data collection goals including:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Researcher and student lodging and associated amenities</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Office/lab space and associated equipment</li> <li>-Storage space for researchers</li> <li>-Vehicles, safety equipment, and other tools that facilitate use of RRCR for research</li> <li>• Develop data infrastructure that facilitates research, including:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Database of research and monitoring data (see Goal 2)</li> <li>-Monitoring and other baseline data to support pilot projects and research proposals</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Data sharing and use agreement</li> </ul>
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Goal 2: Increase use of research results, data, and related tools

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a widely accessible, centralized database of monitoring and research data</li> </ul>	RRCR Research Director; Northwest Knowledge Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Database that is updated at least annually and has web-based access</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase availability of historical information and records</li> </ul>	RRCR Research Director; CALS/CNR website coordinators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical information and records summarized and available on the RRCR website; easily accessible by stakeholders</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop communication tools highlighting research results and availability of data</li> </ul>	RRCR Research Director; CALS/CNR website coordinators and communication specialists; University Communications and Marketing; The Rangeland Center; UI Faculty; Working Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Webpage with bibliography and links to citations of RRCR-related publications, recorded presentations, and outreach materials</li> <li>• Increased presence of RRCR-research results, data, and tools on online and social media outlets</li> </ul>

Goal 3: Establish a nationally recognized program of research that facilitates understanding of working landscapes and ecosystem processes

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate research projects focused on understanding rangeland ecosystem processes including primary production, trophic structure, organic matter accumulation, inorganic inputs and nutrient cycling, ecological disturbances, and livestock production</li> </ul>	RRCR Research Director; UI Faculty; Faculty at other institutions; Office of Research and Economic Development; The Rangeland Center; researchers at government agencies; Working Groups	Grant proposals that address core research topics submitted to diverse sponsoring agencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Align core research with nationally recognized programs like the LTER, LTAR, and NEON Networks<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	RRCR Research Director; UI Faculty; Faculty at other institutions; Office of Research and Economic Development; The Rangeland Center; researchers at government agencies	Research programs that contribute to development of a coherent proposal to NSF LTER or NEON programs, and/or USDA LTAR program

Goal 4: Monitor populations of known sensitive species

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Conduct greater sage-grouse lek surveys	RRCR Research Director; Idaho Department of Fish and Game; Bureau of Land Management	Location data and status information for grouse leks on and near RRCR
B. Monitor habitat use by sage-grouse	RRCR Research Director; Bureau of Land Management	Movement and habitat use data on and near RRCR property

<sup>1</sup> Long-term Ecological Research (LTER) Network and Long-term Agroecosystem Research (LTAR) Network sites examine and explore long-term and large-scale trends and phenomena, helping to understand an ecosystem, a place, or a practice in great depth. These networks offer an opportunity to contribute to research that advances a greater understanding of ecosystem level processes and/or agricultural production are essential in this landscape. Such programs, in turn, provide access to financial resources that would help establish long-term sustainability of the ranch as a research station. The LTER and LTAR networks are known for their significant contribution to knowledge guiding policy development. National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON) is a continental-scale observation network designed to collect long-term ecological data to better understand how ecosystems are changing.

C. Conduct surveys of other sensitive species as determined by available resources and as occurrences become known	RRCR Research Director; UI Faculty; Idaho Department of Fish and Game; Bureau of Land Management	Occurrence and distribution data
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**Strategic Direction #2**

**Enhance and support livestock operations and related infrastructure**

Goal:

- Use livestock operations to achieve the Vision, consistent with the Strategic Plan and Grassland Reserve Program easements

Intended Outcomes:

- Improved condition of existing livestock-related infrastructure
- New infrastructure to help expand research opportunities
- Improved cattle management techniques utilizing herding and supplements

Goal 1: Use livestock operations, including infrastructure development and maintenance, to achieve the Vision, consistent with the Strategic Plan and Grassland Reserve Program easements

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Plan for and manage cattle activity consistent with research plans and conservation values through annual grazing plan	Cattle Management Lead; Cattle Manager; Operations Manager; RRCR Research Director	Integrated and consistent grazing management, to meet both near- and long-term research and conservation objectives
B. Maintain and enhance fencing for optimal cattle management	Cattle Manager; Operations Manager	Limit trespass cattle, contain cattle in pastures according to grazing and research plans
C. Identify infrastructure needs including water development	Cattle Management Lead; Cattle Manager; Operations Manager; RRCR Research Director	Prioritized list of infrastructure needs, assessment of locations for water developments



D. Identify near and long-term funding options for infrastructure needs	Operations Manager; Cattle Management Lead; RRCR Research Director; CALS and CNR Development	List of funding options
E. Improved cattle management	Cattle Manager; Cattle Management Lead; Operations Manager	Reduced reliance on fencing; vegetation utilization at desired levels for research, conservation, and livestock production objectives; reduced impacts on sensitive areas

**Strategic Direction #3**

**Enhance and conserve fish and wildlife habitat**

Goals:

- Enhance conservation values of the Ranch to restore water quantity and quality and protect special-status species
- Minimize invasive species and risk of wildfire and employ fire surrogates to maintain conservation values Ensure activities are consistent with GRP easement
- Integrate conservation projects with research objectives

Intended Outcomes:

- Widespread ecological integrity consistent with conservation values and research needs and objectives
- Areas of special ecological or conservation concern or value identified, protected, and monitored as necessary
- Understand how and where to successfully use cattle as a tool to enhance desired upland and riparian conditions

Goal 1: Enhance the conservation values of the Ranch to restore water quantity and quality and protect special-status species

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Identify areas of special concern or value	Advisory Board; Fish and Wildlife Habitat Working Group; RRCR Research Director; Operations Manager; Cattle Manager	Prioritized areas for protection or restoration to maintain or enhance ecological and conservation values
B. Plan for necessary improvements for sensitive areas	Advisory Board; Fish and Wildlife Habitat Working Group; RRCR Research Director; Operations Manager; Cattle Manager	Stepwise plan for improving areas of concern including fence removal/replacement for wildlife benefit

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C. Utilize cattle as a conservation tool via prescribed or targeted grazing, including rest or grazing exclusion where appropriate	Cattle Manager, Cattle Management Lead, Operations Manager, Working Groups	Understanding of how and where cattle grazing can be utilized to achieve beneficial ecological outcomes
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Goal 2: Minimize invasive species and risk of wildfire and employ fire surrogates to maintain conservation values

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Evaluate wildfire risk, plan for post-fire rehabilitation needs	Operations Manager; UI Faculty and graduate students	Wildfire risk and rehabilitation plan that will guide management activities to reduce wildfire risk and prepare for rehabilitation
B. Treat invasive weeds with herbicides and targeted grazing where feasible	Operations Manager; CWMA; UI Faculty	Fewer noxious weeds

Goal 3: Ensure activities are consistent with GRP easement (see also Strategic Direction 5 regarding public access)

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Consult GRP easement and NRCS staff when evaluating and approving research project requests and property improvements as necessary	Operations Manager, Director of Research	Approved projects are consistent with the Easement and the ranch Vision. NRCS approvals documented as necessary.
B. Work with NRCS to maintain a conservation easement plan that is consistent with the GRP easement and the Vision for the Ranch	NRCS staff, Operations Manager, RRCR Research Director; Advisory Board delegates	Conservation plan for next 5+ years
C. Prepare summary of GRP easement restrictions	TNC staff	Summary of GRP easement restrictions

Goal 4: Integrate conservation projects with research objectives

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Identify and integrate feasible and appropriate conservation projects with research objectives	Operations manager; RRCR Research Director; Research and Monitoring Working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservation projects supported by science</li> </ul>

	Group; Fish and Wildlife Habitat Working Group; Advisory Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research projects that address broader impacts for working, multi-use landscapes (see Strategic Direction 1)</li> <li>• Conservation and research projects that complement the respective goals of each</li> </ul>
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**Strategic Direction #4**

**Conduct education, extension and outreach programs (EEO)**

Goals:

- Use knowledge acquired at the Ranch to inform cattle grazing, conservation, and rangeland policy practices
- Identify infrastructure needs for conducting education, extension, and outreach at RRCR
- Create a legacy of accumulated knowledge accomplished through citizen science efforts
- Provide opportunities for diverse publics to connect with sagebrush steppe landscape and a working ranch

Intended Outcomes

- Science and management conducted at the Ranch is delivered to various stakeholders
- An increased number of stakeholders are engaged in programs and activities at RRCR, including land managers, livestock producers, educators, researchers, policy makers, community leaders, community members and students
- Needs assessment for enhancing education, extension, and outreach at RRCR
- Public establishes a connection to sagebrush ecosystem and familiarity with working ranch

Goal 1: Use knowledge acquired at the Ranch to inform cattle grazing, conservation, and rangeland policy practices

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Generate list of audiences and mechanism for connecting with those audiences	Extension faculty; Education and Outreach Working Group	Audience list
B. Establish education partnerships with community groups	Extension faculty; Education and Outreach Working Group; Advisory Board; UI Director of Extension	New partnerships with regional and local education groups & livestock industry stakeholders and ranchers

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C. Create connections with livestock industry for specific EEO activities	Extension faculty; Education and Outreach Working Group; Advisory Board; UI Director of Extension	New opportunities for EEO in collaboration with agriculture
D. Establish K-12 school partnerships	Extension faculty; Education and Outreach Working Group; Advisory Board; UI Director of Extension; UI Director of 4-H and Youth Development	New collaborations with local or regional K-12 schools and 4-H
E. Engage Advisory Board in developing new opportunities for EEO	Extension faculty; Education and Outreach Working Group; Advisory Board	New EEO programs and events

Goal 2: Identify infrastructure needs for conducting education, extension, and outreach at RRCR

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Determine necessary infrastructure	Education and Outreach Working Group; Ops Manager; Dir. of Research	List of needs (software, supplies, buildings, portable shade structures, toilets, etc.)
B. Identify funding sources	Education and Outreach Working Group; Ops Manager; Dir. of Research; Advisory Board	List of potential funding sources

Goal 3: Create a legacy of accumulated knowledge accomplished through citizen science efforts

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Engage stakeholders through monitoring efforts	Extension faculty; Education and Outreach Working Group; Advisory Board	Increased stakeholder engagement, understanding, and feedback

Goal 4: Provide opportunities for public to connect with sagebrush steppe landscape and a working ranch

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Plan engagement opportunities for public	Education and Outreach Working Group; Extension faculty	Annual event(s) conducted – Sagebrush Saturdays, sage grouse viewing, wildflower walks, dutch oven ranch gathering, etc.

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## Strategic Direction #5

### Manage public access and recreation

Goals:

- Provide a wide range of managed recreational opportunities on the Ranch; ensure these uses are consistent with the GRP Easements and balanced with other Ranch uses
- Utilize recreational opportunities to enhance communication with and education of users

Intended Outcomes:

- Enhance communication with and education of recreational users
- Connect with the broader community through recreation
- Establish infrastructure necessary to manage recreation (parking areas, signs, gates/fences)

Goal 1: Provide a wide range of managed recreational opportunities on the Ranch; ensure uses are consistent with GRP Easements and balanced with other ranch uses

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Communicate appropriate ranch uses	Operations manager; Public Access Working Group; relevant community recreation groups	Designate parking areas and install signage
B. Gather baseline data on recreational uses, locations, timing, type of use	Operations manager with public access working group members, in consultation with UI faculty	Data set to help understand and manage recreational uses, feed into future research
C. Monitor recreational uses for GRP easement consistency, including motorized uses	Operations Manager	Adherence to GRP Easement terms, decrease in trespass motorized use
D. Confirm all recreation enhancements are consistent with GRP easement before application	Operations Manager, NRCS staff	Approval secured where needed. Documentation of coordination with NRCS if required.
E. Communicate with public and create infrastructure necessary to minimize conflicts with grazing and research.	Operations Manager, with Public Access Working Group, Cattle Management Lead, Cattle Manager.	Signs, gates, fences, as necessary

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Goal 2: Utilize recreational opportunities to enhance communication with and education of users

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Communicate with public about wildlife habitat needs – utilize public access working group network to communicate when specific areas should be avoided to limit wildlife disturbance and habitat damage	Operations Manager, with Public Access Working Group members and UI Communications	Timely signs, social media posts, website updates, other forms of outreach as necessary
B. Create a list of opportunities to host and educate the recreation community about RRCR	Operations manager with Public Access Working Group and partners, UI Communications & events teams	Identify opportunities for existing recreational or educational events that increase community connection with RRCR

**Strategic Direction #6**

**Increase marketing, communications, and fundraising**

Goals:

- Diversify support for the Ranch
- Determine ways to support RRCR operations to ensure long-term relevancy, support, and stability

Intended Outcomes

- Coordinated communication strategy that reaches a broad audience
- Targeted communication and marketing materials
- Understanding of needs and potential sources of support
- Strategies for soliciting diverse sources of support

Goal 1: Diversify support for and enhance relevancy of the Ranch.

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Target communications to key elected officials, agency leaders, donors, and stakeholders	Development staff with Operations manager & RRCR Advisory board; Federal Relations program	Current list of relevant parties

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B. Host regular meetings, webinars, or ranch tours to communicate implementation of the Vision	RRCR Research Director, Communications team, Operations Manager	Enhanced communication of ongoing efforts
C. Identify funding needs for enhancing ranch management and research	Ops Manager, RRCR Research Director, Cattle Manager	Prioritized list of needs, with timeline
D. Identify potential funding sources for non-research projects	RRCR Research Director; Ops Manager; Cattle Manager; Advisory Board; Office of Research and Economic Development	Funding source list with target application dates
E. Solicit private funds for operational needs	UI Development officers in collaboration with UI Deans or other UI Administration, Operations Manager, RRCR Research Director, Cattle Manager	New relationships with donors; charitable contributions and commitments of charitable gifts

Goal 2: Determine ways to support RRCR operations to ensure long-term relevancy, support, and stability

Key Actions	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Develop and implement use fee structure	Operations Manager; RRCR Research Director	Income to support ranch operations
B. Explore recovery of UI F&A fees, reduced F&A, or other funding mechanisms	Operations Manager; RRCR Research Director; UI administration	Income to support necessary improvements to benefit research and operations
C. Maintain and manage allocated ranch budget	Operations Manager; RRCR Research Director; Fiscal Staff	Yearly financial overview

### Strategic Direction #7

#### Develop and sustain collaboration with Advisory Board and other stakeholders

Goal:

- Engage collaboratively with the Advisory Board on research, education, outreach, and management activities

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Intended Outcomes

- Coordinated communication between Advisory Board and University of Idaho personnel
- Multiple opportunities for input from Advisory Board on Ranch-related projects and activities
- Engagement of Advisory Board in Ranch activities and potential research topics from inception to conclusion, to foster broad, long-term support for RRCR

Goal: Engage collaboratively with the Advisory Board on research, education, outreach, and management activities

Key Activities	Implementation Responsibility	Deliverables
A. Bi-annual Advisory Board Meetings (March, November)	Advisory Board Chair and Vice-Chair, Ops Manager, RRCR Research Director;	Strategic direction set for RRCR. Opportunity to assess status of implementing strategic plan. Opportunity for communication to advance strategies for collaborative research and management
B. Annual Research Webinar (February/March)	RRCR Research Director; UI Faculty; External Faculty; Advisory Board	Presentations to ensure other researchers and stakeholders are aware of research program activities at the ranch, opportunity for communication regarding collaborative research and management
C. Annual Advisory Board Field Tour (June)	Advisory Board Chair and Vice-Chair, Dir. of Research	Opportunity for communication to advance strategies for collaborative research and management
D. Working Group activities	Working Groups	Input from diverse working group members. Collaboration on research and management.
E. “Rock Creek Sustainability Days” - opportunities for faculty to listen to stakeholder issues in a field setting (at RRCR or other location)	RRCR Research Director; Ops Manager, Advisory Board, UI Faculty	New ideas generated for relevant research
F. Measure impacts and strategic plan progress	RRCR Research Director; Operations Manager, Cattle Operations Manager	Annual report



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## References

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