

The logo for Blackfoot Challenge features the word "Blackfoot" in a large, bold, blue sans-serif font. Below it, the word "CHALLENGE" is written in a smaller, all-caps, blue sans-serif font. A stylized blue wave graphic underlines "Blackfoot" and extends to the left. The background of the entire page is a scenic landscape of rolling green hills, several tall evergreen trees in the foreground, and a range of blue-toned mountains in the distance under a clear sky.

Blackfoot CHALLENGE

Better Rural Communities through Collaborative Conservation

2022 ANNUAL REPORT

Message from the **Chairman**

When the Blackfoot Challenge was formed back in 1993, the framework rose up from a commitment to check in with watershed communities – to regularly ask questions and provide a forum for feedback. That’s the heart and soul of a truly community-based organization.

Approaching our 30th anniversary in 2022, that community check-in process became more important than ever as we set out to strategize about the Challenge’s future priorities and direction. Months of in-depth conversations and brainstorming allowed us to tap into the expertise and experience of many diverse residents and partners. The end result is a strategic plan built on a solid foundation of a collaborative, inclusive process.

With this plan, we continue to focus on the strength of what’s working well – from voluntary water conservation during drought to proven tools for preventing conflicts with bears and wolves. But it’s also important that we acknowledge changing threats and impacts to the watershed – and then adapt, innovate and expand our response.

So we look ahead with ideas for engaging future generations and newcomers to the Blackfoot, for safely expanding the use of prescribed fire to improve forest health, and for piloting innovations in soil health and stream restoration.

The one constant that remains is the passion that fuels partnerships and projects from ridgetop to ridgetop in this amazing landscape. With gratitude and respect for our predecessors who taught us how to work together to care for this special place, we look into the future knowing that there are few problems we can’t solve when we make a commitment to get along and get things done.

Thank you as always for your participation and your support.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jim Stone".

Jim Stone

Rolling Stone Ranch, Ovando
Blackfoot Challenge Board Chair

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jim Stone".

Blackfoot Community Conservation Area

A working landscape that balances ecological diversity with local economic sustainability. *Established 2005.*

- Completed 65 acres of forest treatments to improve forest health and resilience. Conducted planning and inventory of an additional 380 acres.
- Controlled invasive weeds on road systems, forest treatments, and native prairies through integrated approaches across 200 acres.
- Hosted multiple volunteer days with university and hunter groups to remove conifers from aspen stands, collect old wire, pull weeds, and improve the kiosk area.
- Hosted multiple presentations and education events on/about the BCCA to visiting groups including local schools, university and international groups.
- Provided year-round public access on 5,600 acres, including hiking trails, 6-week motorized use season, and hunting via the Block Management Program.
- Expanded walking trails by 2 miles.
- Partnered with the US Forest Service and Montana DNRC on road improvements required to open a seasonal, cross-boundary motorized loop in 2023.



Conservation Strategies

Coordinating land conservation and stewardship to keep working landscapes intact. *Established 2000.*

- Hosted an in-person annual gathering for more than 30 public and private conservation practitioners to share information and leverage one another's land conservation efforts. The meeting led to the creation of a work group that will coordinate on rapid response needs related to development threats and land conservation priorities.



Education

Nurturing watershed awareness and stewardship through place-based education. *Established 1993.*

- Provided training on winter safety, gear and survival, and basic avalanche safety to students at Lincoln, Helmville, Ovando, Potomac, and Seeley-Swan schools.
- Provided Bear Aware education to classes at Bonner, Potomac, Sunset, Helmville, Ovando, and an all-day Bear Aware event for Lincoln School.
- Offered bird education lessons to students at Bonner and Helmville schools.
- Hosted 90 students and teachers from Seeley-Swan High School for a day of watershed education activities on the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area.
- Provided aquatic ecology activities and monitored stream flows with students from Potomac, Sunset, Ovando and Helmville schools.
- Hosted 125 middle school students from five watershed schools for our Annual Youth Field Day on the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area. Challenge staff and partners from the US Forest Service Fire Sciences Lab and Swan Valley Connections provided hands-on activities about forestry and ecology.
- Ten watershed residents in our citizen science program monitored populations of long-billed curlews and common loons.
- Hosted a Pure Montana Tales Zoom presentation on regenerative ranching by members of the Mannix Brothers Ranch for more than 80 people.



Forestry

Restoring forest health and reducing wildfire risk near communities.

Established 2008.

- Facilitated 438 acres of prescribed burning on private lands and supported public partner burns across more than 1,900 acres.
- Completed 144 acres of forest thinning to improve forest health and reduce fire risk.
- Conducted six outreach / education tours or events throughout the Blackfoot to showcase prescribed fire effects and efforts.
- Staff attended the annual Fire Learning Network workshop in Virginia.
- Staff attended a prescribed fire training exchange hosted by the Klamath Tribe and Mid-Klamath Watershed Council.



Land Stewardship

Supporting landowners through stewardship assistance to enhance watershed-wide resilience. Established 2016.

- Partnered with NRCS to develop the North Ovando Fuel Reduction TIP (Targeted Implementation Plan) to provide funding for fuel reduction treatments to mitigate catastrophic wildfires and create resilient forest stands on over 1,000 acres of private forest.
- Assisted Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited (BBCTU), US Fish & Wildlife Service, and landowners with the development of grazing management plan for Nevada Creek stream restoration project (phase 5) including more than 1 mile of riparian fencing and planning off-stream stock water system.
- Implemented the first year of Cottonwood Creek riparian grazing management plan with success.
- Assisted BBCTU and USFWS with implementing a stock water system for a landowner in lieu of an inefficient 2-mile irrigation ditch and associated fish screen.
- Together with NRCS, coordinated conifer encroachment removal projects on private lands in the Helmville area to conserve grassland/sage habitat.
- Assisted BBCTU with maintenance of 8 fish screens to mitigate fish entrainment in irrigation ditches.



Trumpeter Swans

Restoring trumpeter swans to their native habitat on Blackfoot wetlands. *Established 2004.*

- Seven pairs of trumpeter swans hatched 30 and successfully fledged 23 cygnets. At least 30 additional non-nesting swans summered in the watershed. We reached our official goal of at least seven successful nests for at least two consecutive years, and the population is considered “restored.” Additionally, swans are expanding into the neighboring Swan Valley with two successful nests there in 2022.
- One adult swan was fitted with GPS radio collar, allowing us to track summer habitat use, fall migration, and wintering site locations.



Vegetation

Integrated, locally led approaches to invasive plant management across fence lines.
Established 1995.

- Offered integrated noxious weed management recommendations to landowners including native and exotic plant identification, herbicide application products and rates, biological control with insects, and appropriate reseeding practices.
- Hosted two weed pulls at the Russell Gates Fishing Access Site for the 24th consecutive year.
- Coordinated noxious weed treatments on the BCCA.
- Provided native and invasive plant identification workshops during multiple Blackfoot Challenge youth education events.



WATER

Voluntary water stewardship grounded in shared knowledge and shared commitment. *Established 2000.*

- Convened a stakeholder group to build shared understanding, vision, and capacity to address river recreation pressures in the watershed.
- The irrigation scheduling program completed its 13th year, providing weekly irrigation tips, drought strategies, and soil health practices to over 100 irrigators throughout the watershed.
- Our soil moisture monitoring program added 3 additional locations bringing the total to 17 locations where irrigators can track daily soil moisture information and manage their irrigation accordingly.
- Supported partner efforts on two hydrologic studies— one on the Blackfoot River and one in the Nevada Creek drainage. Results will provide important information to help guide strategic implementation of water conservation efforts.
- Worked with multiple partners and landowners to explore potential stream and riparian area restoration projects to benefit fisheries, improve drought resiliency, and increase wetland habitats.
- Working with the Blackfoot Drought Response Committee, implemented drought response in late summer and monitored flows in several key tributaries all summer. Voluntary conservation slowed the river's decline during a hot, dry summer.



Wildlife

Reducing human-wildlife conflicts through proactive and preventative strategies.

Established 2002.

- In 2022, reached the 10,000+ mark for livestock carcasses removed from ranches and delivered to the composting site since the program began in 2003 to reduce conflicts with grizzly bears and wolves.
- Built 6 high-priority permanent electric fences to reduce conflicts with grizzly bears around ranch compounds and calving yards. Also built 16 temporary electric fences to keep grizzly bears out of chickens/feed, bulk livestock feed, barns, shops, grain silos, apples and garbage.

- Deployed 21 electric drive-over mats tied into electric fences in the watershed to reduce conflicts with grizzly bears.
- Hired 2 seasonal range riders to help ranchers monitor livestock, wolves and grizzly bears on their summer grazing leases. Nearly 3,000 head of livestock were monitored for 13 producers across 59,600 acres.
- Employed Elk Hunt Coordinator to respond to information requests from hunters and schedule hunts on participating ranches during shoulder seasons.
- Conducted winter surveys in the Southwest Crown of the Continent for lynx, wolverine, wolves, mountain lions, marten and bobcat.

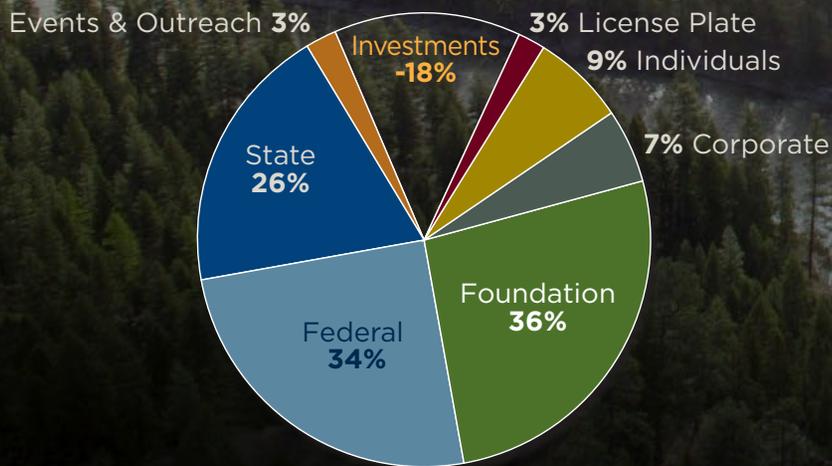


FINANCIALS

JANUARY - DECEMBER 2022

SOURCE OF FUNDS

\$1,963,466



USE OF FUNDS

\$1,623,393

