



Blackfoot CHALLENGE

Better Rural Communities through Collaborative Conservation



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

Message from the **Chairman**

Thirty years as a community-based organization marks a big milestone for the Blackfoot Challenge. Anniversaries prompt plenty of reflection about what you have accomplished and what's left to be done. For some of us who have been on this journey for decades now, anniversaries also make us contemplate the transition to a new generation of leaders.

Across our programs, the Blackfoot Challenge works to share our collaborative model with others and nurture that next group of stewards. Each fall, our Education Program hosts Youth Field Day for schools in the watershed – engaging students in hands-on lessons about wildlife, water, forests and ranching. We host tours for visiting groups from other states – and even other countries. These tours often start with a very specific interest in topics like wildlife conflict and drought management, but always circle back to the bigger question of how people in the Blackfoot have built trust and found common ground.

In 2023, a new event introduced us to some inspiring future leaders. We hosted several students from a Minnesota high school for a week-long field course on natural resource stewardship and community collaboration. By week's end, they eagerly shared what they learned: how conservation and agriculture could align, how people from different backgrounds could find common ground – and how those lessons might shape their own futures. It's amazing to see the moment that these young people understand the art of collaboration – and, thanks to them, we have a lot of hope for the next 30 years.

Thank you as always for your participation and your support.



Jim Stone
Rolling Stone Ranch, Ovando
Blackfoot Challenge Board Chair



Blackfoot Birds

Restoring trumpeter swans and monitoring bird species across Blackfoot habitats. *Established 2004.*

- Monitored trumpeter swan nests across the watershed and Brewer's sparrow numbers in Helmville-area conifer encroachment project sites.
- Engaged 10 watershed residents in our community science program, monitoring populations of long-billed curlews and common loons.
- Presented to U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Migratory Birds & Science Programs tour.
- Contributed column on trumpeter swan recovery success for Pathfinder newspaper.
- Provided raptor education lessons to students at Bonner and Helmville schools.



Blackfoot Community Conservation Area

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

Forestry

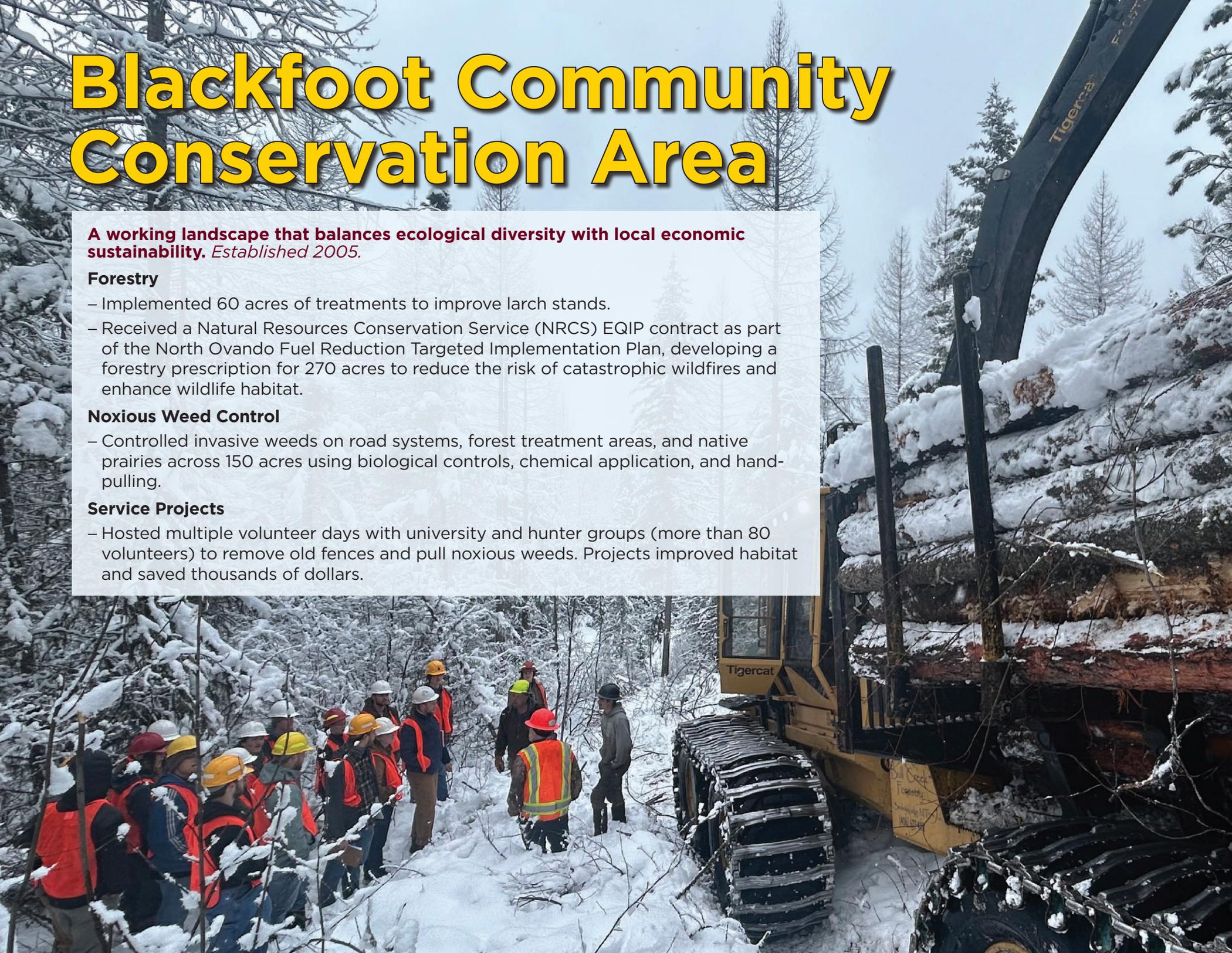
- Implemented 60 acres of treatments to improve larch stands.
- Received a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) EQIP contract as part of the North Ovando Fuel Reduction Targeted Implementation Plan, developing a forestry prescription for 270 acres to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires and enhance wildlife habitat.

Noxious Weed Control

- Controlled invasive weeds on road systems, forest treatment areas, and native prairies across 150 acres using biological controls, chemical application, and hand-pulling.

Service Projects

- Hosted multiple volunteer days with university and hunter groups (more than 80 volunteers) to remove old fences and pull noxious weeds. Projects improved habitat and saved thousands of dollars.



Blackfoot Community Conservation Area continued

Education

- Hosted multiple presentations about the BCCA to visiting groups including local schools, university, and international groups, reaching more than 300 people.

Access

- Provided year-round public access on 5,600 acres, including hiking trails, 8-week motorized use season, and hunting via the Block Management Program.
- Maintained and expanded 3-mile hiking trail system.
- Completed road improvements and opened a seasonal, cross-boundary motorized loop in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

Conservation Programs

- Implemented the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program completing multiple conservation enhancements, including wildlife-friendly fencing, forest treatments, noxious weed control, and vegetation monitoring.

Wetland Enhancements

- Installed two beaver dam analogs as a demonstration to enhance wetland habitat, reconnect flood plain, and improve late season stock water.



Education

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

- Provided hands-on outdoor snowpack science experiences to students at Lincoln, Helmville, and Ovando schools.
- Coordinated forestry lessons for students at Sunset School.
- Presented on collaborative stewardship to Helena High School students.
- Delivered bear education activities to youth fishing camp attendees at North Fork Crossing Lodge.
- Provided aquatic ecology activities for students from Seeley Lake Elementary and the Montana Outdoor Science Academy.
- Hosted more than 100 middle school students from five watershed schools during our annual Youth Field Day on the Rolling Stone Ranch near Ovando, providing hands-on activities about ranching and stewardship.
- Coordinated weeklong field course on collaborative conservation and natural resource science for students from Shattuck-St. Mary's School in Minnesota.



Forestry

Restoring forest health and reducing wildfire risk in and around local communities. *Established 2008.*

- Facilitated 169 acres of prescribed burning on private lands and supported public partner burns across more than 1,400 acres.
- Completed 378 acres of forest thinning to improve forest health and reduce fire risk.
- Conducted 6 outreach / education events throughout the Blackfoot to showcase prescribed fire effects and efforts.
- Hosted the Annual Fire Learning Network workshop for dozens of agency and NGO partners who work in fire-prone landscapes.



Land Stewardship

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

Fuel Reduction

- Partnered with NRCS on the development of the new fuel reduction initiative to reduce fuel loads on over 1,000 acres of private land to mitigate catastrophic wildfires and increase forest resiliency.
- Conducted landowner outreach to increase participation in the program, with 3 contracts covering 500 acres funded in the first year.

Grazing Management Assistance

- Completed Kleinschmidt Creek project, including riparian fencing, stock water gap, and off-stream stock water in preparation for a new, innovative grazing management system.
- Assisted Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and landowners with the development of grazing management plan for the Nevada Creek stream restoration project (phase 6), including more than 2 miles of riparian fencing and 2 stock water gaps.
- Continued to implement Cottonwood Creek riparian grazing management plan with landowner and lessee, adding plans for off-stream stock water in 2024.

Soil Health

- Together with The Nature Conservancy, coordinated the application and monitoring of biochar in 5 locations on private agricultural lands.

Conifer Encroachment

- Together with NRCS and USFWS, continued to plan conifer encroachment removal projects in the Helmsville area to conserve grassland and rangeland habitat, benefiting rare native bird species.
- With private and federal partners, completed conifer removal across more than 1,000 acres.

Fish Screens

- Assisted with maintenance and landowner communications for 8 fish screens to mitigate fish entrainment in irrigation ditches.

Education

- Presented information on soil health to Partnerscapes conference tour group, reaching over 150 participants from around the nation.
- Gave presentations to University of Montana wildlife biology class on conifer encroachment, University of Idaho range management class on grazing management, and Drummond School students on stream restoration.



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 2 weed pulls at the Russell Gates Fishing Access Site for the 25th year.
- Completed Wildlife Habitat Improvement (WHIP) grant with noxious weed treatments on the BCCA, including spot spray herbicide applications on 271 acres and biological control with insects on 135 acres.
- Applied for a continuation of the WHIP grant to revisit treated areas and initiate noxious weed treatment on new areas within the BCCA core.
- Covered approximately 95 miles of the Blackfoot River Corridor Vegetation Management Area in Powell and Missoula counties and treated almost 40 acres of noxious weeds through a Montana Noxious Weed Trust Fund Grant.
- Met with landowners in the Nevada Creek Vegetation Management Area and applied for a Noxious Weed Trust Fund cost-share grant for the 2024 field season.
- Assisted in native plant and noxious weed education, weed pulling, and reseeding workshops on the BCCA during student field days.



Water

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

- Continued to build shared vision and capacity to address river recreation pressures in the watershed through a stakeholder group. Added a volunteer recreation coordinator and partnered with the University of Montana's Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management department to collect information on recreation use.
- Completed the 14th year of our irrigation scheduling program, providing weekly irrigation information, drought strategies, and soil health tips to over 100 irrigators throughout the watershed.
- Continued in our 4th year of a soil moisture monitoring program with 17 locations where irrigators track daily soil moisture information, manage their irrigation accordingly, and test different irrigation or cropping strategies.
- Coordinated partner efforts to collect the second year of hydrologic data the Blackfoot River and Nevada Creek. Results provided important information to guide water conservation efforts and answer questions about the watershed's hydrology.
- Worked with multiple partners and landowners to monitor stream flow on 3 tributary streams to inform restoration designs that benefit fisheries, improve drought resiliency, and increase wetland habitats.
- Working with the Blackfoot Drought Response Committee, implemented drought response in late summer and coordinated with more than 80 drought response participants to ensure shared water conservation.
- Participated in 6 outreach events delivering messages on stream health, water conservation, and collaborative stewardship to over 400 students, natural resource professionals, and landowners.



Wildlife

Reducing human-wildlife conflicts through proactive and preventative strategies *Established 2002.*

- Employed Elk Hunt Coordinator to work with hunters on hunting opportunities and schedule hunts on participating ranches during the elk hunt shoulder seasons.
- Conducted winter surveys in the Southwest Crown of the Continent for lynx, wolverine, wolves, mountain lions, marten and bobcat.
- Installed 6 new electric fences and 9 new drive-over electric mat systems (added to 21 existing mats) to deter grizzly bears from home sites and prevent bears from getting into conflict. Also provided fence materials to protect 3 bee yards, 1 chicken coop, 1 goat pen and 1 hobby farm.
- Removed 330 carcasses from Blackfoot-area ranches to reduce attractants for bears and wolves. Expanded the program to 2 communities outside the watershed. Since 2003, we have had more than 120 participating ranches and landowners, and more than 11,200 carcasses have been moved to the composting site.

- Hosted interactive “Be Bear Aware” programs at 5 watershed schools; hosted a training for staff at an area guest ranch; and presented a livestock guard dog workshop.
- Provided a team of staff and board to consult with Colorado wildlife managers and landowners as they consider conflict management tools for reintroduced wolves.
- Employed 2 range riders to monitor livestock and wolf/grizzly movement across 72,000 acres to prevent conflicts.
- Provided 15 bear-resistant garbage bins to area residents and helped purchase another 35 bins with state and federal partners to support Seeley Lake’s Clearwater Bear Smart efforts.
- Collected grizzly bear hair samples throughout the watershed in partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to support research efforts.

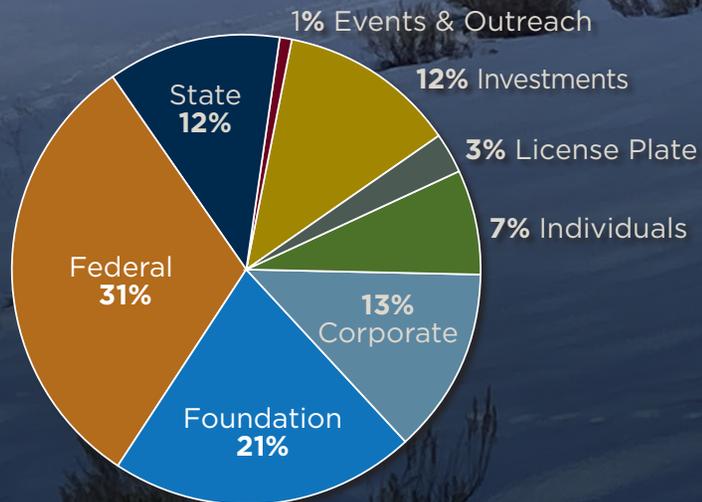


FINANCIALS

JANUARY - DECEMBER 2023

SOURCE OF FUNDS

\$2,461,610



USE OF FUNDS

\$1,969,867

