



Rock Creek Ranch is home to cutting-edge rangeland research because of an innovative partnership between the Wood River Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, the University of Idaho, and a whole lot of collaboration. Photo: ©John Finnell, The Nature Conservancy - Idaho.

ROCK CREEK RANCH: *Home on the range for collaboration, research*

By Steve Stuebner

Idaho's rangelands always have been important "working lands" for cattle and sheep ranchers since pioneers first settled the state, but as time has evolved, many other interests emerged to use rangelands for recreation, fishing, hunting, and the appreciation of nature.

The importance of these lands for wildlife also has come under the microscope like never before when sage grouse were proposed for listing as an endangered species. While the ESA petition to protect sage grouse was denied last year, the spotlight placed on rangelands has raised many questions about how they're managed and what impacts various activities have on rangeland ecosystems.

It was quite timely that the University of Idaho created the UI Rangeland Center in 2010 to create a venue for collaborative research on rangelands, bringing together research projects from professors and graduate students from the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, the College of Natural Resources and also UI Extension staff.

"There was a real need to unite everyone doing range research across campus," notes Karen Launchbaugh, Director of the UI Rangeland Center and a professor of range science. "The real reason is to bring science to the management of Idaho's rangelands."

"This all came about after years of discussion," adds Gretchen Hyde, executive director of the Idaho Rangeland Resource

Commission, whose board has wanted more research done on Idaho's working landscapes. "We need more applied research on livestock grazing and the management of rangelands."

And now rangelands research has a home in southern Idaho. The Wood River Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Idaho worked together to purchase the 10,400-acre Rock Creek Ranch in Blaine County in 2014 from the Rinker family. The two parties worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to place a conservation easement on most of the ranch property to ensure that its natural resources are preserved in perpetuity and that it will be managed as a working ranch. "The Grassland Reserve Program, managed by NRCS and funded by the Farm Bill, was essential to making the project

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work financially and ensures it remains a productive ranch, instead of a housing development as originally planned,” explains Lou Lunte, deputy state director for the Nature Conservancy.

Rock Creek is a real working cattle ranch, with federal grazing permits on an additional 11,000 acres of BLM and state land. The Land Trust and TNC approached the University of Idaho about working together on collaborative research on the ranch, looking at a host of potential projects about the management of livestock and impacts on water, soil, wildlife, sage grouse, recreation and a host of other issues. The three became the Rock Creek Ranch Partners.

“It’s a great fit,” Launchbaugh says. “It’s going to allow us to try things that we’ve never done before.”

The Rock Creek Partners enlisted a large and diverse collaborative group of agencies and interests to help oversee the research program at the Rock Creek Ranch, including the Conservation Commission. The Commission and NRCS’ participation adds value, Launchbaugh says, because of their expertise in riparian restoration and with installing best management practices on private lands.

Rock Creek Ranch Partners

University of Idaho
Wood River Land Trust
The Nature Conservancy

Advisory Committee Member Organizations

Idaho Cattle Association
Natural Resource Conservation Service
Central Idaho Rangeland Network
ID Soil & Water Conservation Commission
ID Rangeland Resource Commission
ID Department of Fish and Game
US Fish and Wildlife Service

Ex-officio Advisors

Bureau of Land Management
TNC, Dir. of Science
Wood River Land Trust, Rock Creek Manager

“Rock Creek is an excellent example of how groups who have diverse objectives can come together with the ranch as the unifying “project”, if you will,” adds John Foltz, Special Assistant to the President for Agricultural Initiatives at the University of Idaho. “It gives us the opportunity to look at the tradeoffs between grazing, wildlife and recreation using sound science-based research, and then convey what we learn to society via education with our students and outreach through University Extension.”

The ranch is a great laboratory in which to conduct research. “What’s unique about the Rock Creek Ranch is that it encompasses a whole watershed,” Launchbaugh says. “Whatever impacts might occur at the top of the watershed will have an impact at the bottom of the watershed.”

One-hundred and fifty cows from the UI Nancy M. Cummings Research, Extension and Education Center in Salmon are being utilized seasonally at Rock Creek Ranch for research projects. One of the first projects underway is the Rock Creek Restoration and Reconnection Project, a project that will provide fish passage between Rock Creek and the lower Big Wood River, and improve water quality and stream function. A \$1.1 million project is planned to improve riparian areas, wet meadows,



Stream temperature is assessed through the use of a solar pathfinder. Photo: Conservation Commission

and fish and wildlife habitat on private lands. That project also will address recreation and public access.

Research projects at Rock Creek also will provide opportunities for public education. “Sagebrush Saturdays” is a new program that kicked off in the summer of 2017, providing field education on a variety of topics for anyone who shows up. In June, people learned about birds of prey, wildflowers and pollinators. In July, the program focused on beavers, bugs, stream-restoration, and sage-grouse.

On August 19, the education program focuses on the relationship between wild-fire, soils, fish and wildlife. The program runs from 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., starting at the Rock Creek Barn. On Sept. 16, there will be a program on the cowboy tradition (featuring livestock management, horseback riders, cowboy poetry, and leatherwork). The programs are open to the public. All Sagebrush Saturday events start from the Rock Creek Barn. Go to the Rock Creek project at www.rangelandcenter.org for directions to the site.

“We’ve had about 30-40 people for each program,” says April Hulet, a U of I assistant professor based in the Rangeland Center office in Boise. “Most of the people come from the Wood River Valley, a few from Twin Falls and a few from Boise.”

“We’re trying to increase people’s awareness of the diversity and complexity of



Conducting a stream assessment on Rock Creek. Photo: Conservation Commission

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rangelands. We want to show people, in the field, how ranching and conservation efforts can work together to create sustainable, healthy rangelands."

One question that the UI Rangeland Center has been working on is "what are rangelands?" They are developing a fact sheet on the subject, and the Rangeland Commission is producing a story and web video on the same topic. It's important to understand what rangelands are - for the general public and K-12 education, Hulet and Hyde say.

Here are some highlights:

Almost half of Idaho's land area is classified as Rangeland. Almost half of the United States is classified as rangeland, and more than 40 percent of the world is classified as Rangeland.

But what are rangelands, exactly? Rangelands are:

- Sagebrush grasslands, also known as shrub-steppe habitat
- Open forests and mountain meadows
- Grasslands
- Juniper woodlands
- Salt desert shrub lands
- Renewable natural resources

Another way to understand the concept is to focus on what rangelands are not. Rangelands are not:

- Cultivated farmlands
- Dense forests
- Barren lands
- Rock and Ice

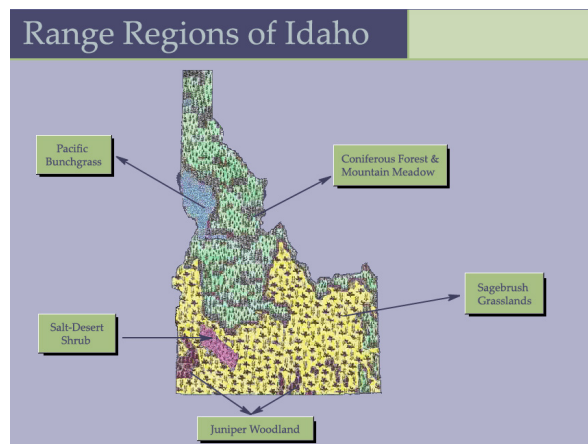
In general, rangelands are the open lands in Idaho with miles upon miles of sagebrush and grasslands in the lower country, and open forests and mountain meadows in the high country.

"Rangelands are incredibly valuable to the ecological and economic health of Idaho," Launchbaugh says. "They are not that well understood, but they're really valuable for many things. They're important for fish and wildlife. Nearly 85 percent of the mammals, 74 percent of the birds, 58 percent of the amphibians and 38 percent of the fish species found in North America spend at least part of their life on rangelands."

"Ranchers have used rangelands for livestock grazing for well over a 100 years. Rangelands also are popular for all kinds of recreation, fishing and hunting. They're a source of clean water and clean air. They even have spiritual and cultural values. Rangelands are really an incredible resource."

This is what the late Picabo rancher Bud Purdy had to say about rangelands, looking back to 1997, when the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission was created to help educate the public and K-12 school children about rangelands. "We need to get the word out to the younger people in the schools, we need more research about rangeland. Not particularly the cattle or the sheep, but the rangeland. It's unbelievable about what it supports, the watershed, wildlife, the rangeland supports everything!"

Who owns rangelands in Idaho? Seventy percent of Idaho's rangelands are public lands managed by the federal and state government. The U.S. Forest Service is the largest landowner with 38 percent ownership, and the BLM is next with 22



Map: University of Idaho

percent. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages seven National Wildlife Refuges in Idaho that contain rangelands.

State lands are managed by the Idaho Department of Lands, Idaho Fish and Game and Idaho Parks and Recreation. Native American lands in Idaho are managed by the Kootenai, Kalispell, Coeur d'Alene, Palouse, Nez Perce, Shoshone-Bannock and Shoshone-Paiute tribes. The rest of Idaho's land mass, or about 30 percent of the state, is privately owned.

How are rangelands managed in Idaho?

It depends on the landowners' mission. By law, the Forest Service and BLM are required to manage rangelands for multiple uses (outside of federally designated wilderness) such as livestock grazing, wildlife, recreation, conserving soil and water resources, controlling noxious weeds and water quality. This is where things can get tricky, trying to balance the management of multiple uses on the same landscape.

And balance is key at the ranch, as well. At Rock Creek Ranch, an advisory committee was formed that has grown to more than 20 members (see list on page 2), who provide guidance and advice and help setting priorities for research, education, and management of the ranch. Overall, there are six key topics that guide the research, says Lou Lunte.

Those topics include: Grazing management on a working ranch; research priorities for the ranch; fish and wildlife habitat restoration priorities, recreation priorities, outreach and education priorities, and a monitoring plan to track results. Six

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subcommittees from the larger Advisory Committee have been assigned to oversee all six subject areas.

Ranching by committee is not a typical model out West. It's unique and unusual to have such a large advisory committee providing guidance on management, education and research, but it's working, Lunte says. "It's been great – we're making great progress on developing a long-term action plan for the ranch."

"It's unusual to have so many people on a collaborative advisory committee, but it's working well," adds Launchbaugh. "You have to remember that we have a lot of examples of people working well together in this state, we have a heritage of collaboration."

Overall, she said the research will center on the "confluence of rangelands, recreation and conservation, how livestock management affects wildlife and recreation."

Because the ranch represents one watershed, the results of research projects will be applied to much broader landscapes with similar dynamics, Lunte says. "What we learn at Rock Creek will have much broader implications for land management on a larger scale."

Already, the group has established 30 monitoring plots on the ranch, which include: weed-monitoring plots, livestock-use plots and range-condition plots. "We will continue to add more monitoring sites every year," Launchbaugh said.



The barn at Rock Creek Ranch. Photo: The Nature Conservancy

In general, research and education programs will include:

- Wet meadow habitat - current condition and needed improvements
- Grazing impacts of livestock on wildlife - especially impacts on sage-grouse.
- Riparian condition and improvements
- Management of invasive plants
- Conservation of fish and amphibians
- Social and economic impacts of ranching and healthy rangelands on local communities

Recreation at the Rock Creek Ranch will be managed to provide bird-watching, dog-walking, hiking, mountain biking, hang gliding, motorized uses and hunting activities, Lunte said. Recreation uses will be managed such that they don't impact wildlife during crucial times such as nesting season, and care will be taken to protect wildlife habitat and minimize conflicts with other ranch uses. The Project plans will address, at a minimum, kinds of use, use periods, access signage, access routes (in-

cluding roads and trails), access management structures, level of integration with surrounding public land recreation and communications to recreational users.

Beyond "Sagebrush Saturdays," outreach efforts will focus on sharing research findings with diverse audiences, including land managers, educators, researchers, policy makers, community leaders and students. Project plans will address a suite of outreach strategies including, but not limited to, publications, workshops, field tours, technical exchanges, and presentations.

"Our group is pretty excited that Rock Creek Ranch is home to research that could significantly and beneficially impact important natural resources and the future of people and ranching in the West," says Teri Murrison, administrator of the Conservation Commission.

"Based on our progress so far and on how things are organized and moving forward among the partners and the advisory committee, I think it's fair to say we're going to see great things." □

Steve Stuebner is a regular contributor to Conservation the Idaho Way.



A recent Sagebrush Saturday. Photo: University of Idaho.

COMMISSION NEWS

What's going on at the Commission?

Along with closing out (and reporting on) last year's work and fiscal recordkeeping, we've shifted into high gear distributing funding to districts, reviewing district match reports, taking on this year's workload, working on a requested budget for FY 2019, and more. There's never a dull moment in voluntary conservation, is there?

We had a great meeting with the Idaho District Employees Association in Boise last month, followed by their visit to our "new" (7 months ago) Boise office in the Water Center.

Personnel Changes

We were (and are) sad to say goodbye to two great employees and friends this month: Jason Miller and Katie Wenetta.

Jason, a great water quality resource conservationist stationed in Marsing, is lucky to be returning to farming and ranching full time! This is a real loss to our agency,

but we are truly happy for him.

We wouldn't be surprised if he stays involved with the Owyhee District and wish him the best.

Katie, our ever-capable administrative assistant, will be moving to Oregon to join her husband who moved there this spring for his job. She came on board about a year and a half ago and quickly proved herself to be an asset.

We're really going to miss her, but we're sure she's going to enjoy living in the same state with her husband! Best wishes, Katie and Garrett.

We're working hard to get both positions filled. Thanks to the team of southeastern



From front left are: Chris Simons, Joyce Smith, Vicki Lukehart, and new district support assistant, Maria Minicucci. Back from left are Delwyne Trefz, Robbie Taylor, Chuck Pentzer, and Terry Hoebelheirich.

Idaho partners (districts and NRCS) who helped us interview for a new water quality resource conservationist.

More soon on our new hires, including Maria! ☐

COMMISSIONERS, IASCD SUPPORT WQPA \$ REQUEST

The Commission and Idaho Soil Conservation District Boards recently agreed to support a FY 2019 budget request to re-fund the Commission's Water Quality Program for Agriculture (WQPA).

The WQPA operated from 2000 - 2010, but has been unfunded for the last seven years. The funding request will include:

1. TRUSTEE AND BENEFITS Fund

- Request minimum of \$1M in ongoing funds for project implementation in regular WQPA program through the GF Trustee and Benefits fund
- Request minimum of \$1M one time

for flood mitigation projects either in WQPA or a separate standalone through the GF Trustee and Benefits fund

2. PERSONNEL fund - Request \$29,000 ongoing in GF Personnel Fund

- Reclassify existing water quality resource conservationist to Ag program specialist (increase salary and benefits by \$12k/year)
- Request .25 additional FTP for fiscal/HR manager (increase salary and benefits by \$17k/yr)

3. OPERATING fund – Request additional \$50k ongoing

- Contract out 2 TMDL Impl. Plans/yr. (\$32k)
- \$18k for program administrative expenses (travel, supplies, overhead, etc.)

For more information on the accomplishments of 10 years of the WQPA in Idaho, please send an email requesting a copy of our August 2017 Monthly District Report to info@swc.idaho.gov.

We think you'll be impressed! ☐

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Photo: Chris Banks

“Ranchers have used rangelands for livestock grazing for well over a 100 years. Rangelands also are popular for all kinds of recreation, fishing and hunting. They’re a source of clean water and clean air. They even have spiritual and cultural values. Rangelands are really an incredible resource.”

- Karen Launchbaugh, University of Idaho,