

TO: RMBL scientists, students, staff and other stakeholders  
FROM: Ian Billick, Kelly Sudderth, Jennie Reithel, Gesa Michel and Steve Jennison  
RE: Review of 2018 Operations  
DATE: December 12, 2018

Thank you for another great year of science and education at RMBL! Each year, we ask for your feedback and formally assess operations at the close of the summer season. We do this so we can: 1) identify changes that would be beneficial, and 2) prioritize those changes, balancing financial and staffing constraints. This memo communicates:

- 1) Our progress on the goals we set after the 2017 season,
- 2) Our synthesis of the feedback we received this year, and
- 3) Goals for improving future operations (both in 2019 and more long term) based on your feedback.

#### What did the evaluation process look like this year?

As in other years, we sent a “flash” survey to RMBL users in late June so we could get a quick take from you on how the summer was going. There were 8 respondents, and we were able to address all actionable items. (Some items were not actionable due to the anonymous nature of the survey.) We conducted an online exit survey for one month (54 responses, up from 24 responses in 2017) and Gesa and Kelly conducted in-person exit interviews with 14 members of the community. We also relied on staff observations and informal feedback.

#### How do we use your feedback and responses?

You are the RMBL users – so your feedback is important to us. You see things that we don’t or won’t see because of how you interact with what RMBL offers. We compiled the results of the online surveys, exit interviews and other information feedback, which we used to inform our planning and budgeting for 2019.

#### Progress report on goals set for 2018

In 2017 we set seven primary goals. Below is a list of those goals and our progress this year.

- 1. Encourage more feedback concerning wireless. (In the past we got general reports that the system was not working when it should, but we got limited actionable information that we could use to diagnose the problems.)** This year we consolidated management of our IT resources with Brian Brown of Slopeside Technology so we could better coordinate requests for Wi-Fi and network support. We asked Brian and his assistant Graham to be onsite in Gothic every Tuesday so they could solicit feedback directly from the community. In addition, we encouraged the community to work directly with Brian if they needed additional bandwidth for uploading large data files. Our sense is that these measures generally improved users’ experience with the Internet, although we acknowledge that internet speeds are not always comparable to your home institutions, due to the limitations of the infrastructure at Gothic. (more on that below)
- 2. Provide more information to scientists concerning IT, including information for making Skype calls and using the board room.** We posted Internet handouts on cabin walls, cabin binders, and the newsletter – how to reach Brian Brown and how to troubleshoot internet issues. We included access to IT support on the RMBL website <http://www.rmbll.org/internet/>. We informed the PI community via the listserv for how best to make Skype calls, and encouraged people to reach out directly to Brian with IT needs.
- 3. Stronger enforcement of parking.** We increased monitoring of parking and felt that compliance increased as a result.
- 4. Provide stronger orientation concerning human-wildlife interactions, including how to respond to bats in cabins.** We provided training as part of the staff orientation and general orientation on human-wildlife interactions. We developed and circulated handouts for how to

respond if you come into contact with a bat or other wildlife, and we installed bat houses at several sites in Gothic. These measures seemed to allay concerns or fears about bats in cabins.

5. **Provide more training for working safely in field settings.** We addressed this issue by adding a section on 'safety in the field' in the cabin binders and additional text in the 'research information' section. Also, in the undergraduate program, there was a workshop on an 'orientation to hiking' that included a lot of safety information.
6. **Create greater transparency for tracking responses to work crew requests.** Steve and his crew logged all work crew requests in a shared document, and kept it updated throughout the summer. This allowed Sam, Gesa and Kelly to keep users updated about the status of their work crew requests in a more timely manner. Most requests were addressed within 48 hours, and the staff was better able to communicate directly with users when there would be a delay (typically due to ordering parts, etc.).
7. **Provide the community more timely information about groups visiting during the summer.** We utilized the newsletter to keep the community informed about visiting groups. We informed of our new group arrivals, such as the University of Ottawa field course, the GC Mass Spec course, three weddings, the MtnClim conference and groups in late September. When group participants resided with other scientists in cabins, we individually informed scientists.

#### Overall assessment of 2018 summer operations

We felt that summer operations went well. Responses to our survey were overwhelmingly positive, and in person interviews supported our sense that people are generally satisfied with operations.

We felt that the addition of the Chief Operating Officer position led to an overall increase in the level of services RMBL provided to the community, including better financial systems, emergency management (i.e. fire safety) and more one-on-one personal outreach. There were fewer general anxiety issues in the community, which we attributed to increased staff capacity. Jennie and Ian were able to invest extra effort to stay connected to the RA's and grad students, and there was more time for Ian to work on outreach and donor cultivation. Kelly gave us new insights into community dynamics – from someone with a fresh, non-scientific perspective.

One of our biggest concerns this summer was fire danger due to the drought conditions. We established this as a high risk in the spring and updated RMBL's emergency response plan. Thankfully, we did not have to use that plan, and we appreciate the level of diligence and compliance with the fire restrictions from the community this summer. We anticipate that fire frequency will increase over time, and that will place additional pressures on the research community. We will continue to manage this dynamic situation as best we can.

Due to the earlier snowmelt this year, more teams arrived earlier than in previous years. (28 arrivals before June 1 in 2017, compared to 54 in 2018) This presented a number of challenges, including: communicating about the road opening (difficult because the County is doing more early season maintenance on the road every year, and that can be unpredictable), lack of bathing facilities (shower house can't open until the risk of overnight freezing abates) and opening cabins (sometimes we have to make tradeoffs between getting someone into a cabin quickly and deep-cleaning the cabin before their arrival). We aren't in control of the timeline for the road opening, so our ability to improve this situation for all users is somewhat limited. However, we are exploring ways to better manage expectations for early season arrivals.

Overall, it is a challenge to balance RMBL's financial and staffing resources with the creep in the level of service RMBL is expected to provide. RMBL's operating budget is insufficient to fully support all equipment and buildings that we have in place. Managing expectations for basic maintenance will be important until we can increase investment in operations.

### Goals for 2019

Implementation of the items below is contingent upon the 2019 budget and availability of staff time. These items were selected because they were mentioned numerous times in our survey and they are actionable within our financial means (i.e. specific enough to design a solution).

1. Laundry room – improve outside drying lines, repair coin slots, remove non-working machines, replace at least one washing machine.
2. Early season arrivals – Improve communication with early season arrivals with regard to road opening, road repairs and cabin openings (for example, to help manage expectations for cabins that may not be deep-cleaned at start of season due to compressed time between road opening and arrivals of researchers).
3. Clearly communicate responsibilities for re-stocking supplies in outhouses. (i.e. which outhouses are maintained by RMBL, and which outhouses are maintained by all community users).
4. Provide a way to provide feedback on internet issues in addition to [helpdesk@rmbll.org](mailto:helpdesk@rmbll.org).
5. Consistently open dining hall at 5:30 am.
6. Refresh Yule cabin.
7. Declutter content in cabins. (to enhance ability to keep cabins clean).
8. Install photo board to help connect people in the community. (Participation will be optional, but this has been used successfully at other field stations with a large community.)

### A few notes on the Internet and Website

We received feedback that the internet was more reliable and generally ran well compare to previous years. However, we know that internet speeds at Gothic are not always comparable to more urban locations.

That won't change until we completely overhaul the Wi-Fi infrastructure, which is an investment that is currently beyond RMBL's capability. However, we will continue to make incremental improvements (as we did this summer) until we can replace the entire system.

We received some feedback that the website is wonderful and easy to use, and other feedback that the website is difficult to navigate. We will continue to organize information on the website as best we can, and we welcome any feedback on areas that you find to be especially cumbersome.

### Longer Term Goals for Operations

In the online survey, we asked, "How important is it that RMBL continue to upgrade living and lab facilities?" 53.85% of respondents said it was Important, 32.69% said it is Very Important, and 13.46% said it is Not Important. This is consistent with informal feedback from the community and is reflected in the goals that the Board of Trustees recently adopted as part of RMBL's new strategic plan, which is attached to this memo.

Longer term operational goals in that plan include:

- 1) Addressing deferred maintenance at Gothic.
- 2) Improving (or replacing) Wi-Fi.
- 3) Expanding RMBL's data infrastructure.
- 4) Improving navigation and information flows on the RMBL website.
- 5) Developing and realizing a sustainable financial model which adequately supports building, lab, equipment and IT infrastructure for the RMBL community.

We recognize that we continue to overfill some cabins. The ADA cabin will come online at the end of the 2019 field season, and the spots in that cabin will allow us to reduce occupancies in some cabins.

Inflationary pressures (cost of materials, healthcare, housing in the Valley) combined with a tougher regulatory environment and growing needs of the scientific community (longer field season, big data, more equipment) means that RMBL needs a different financial model – one that will allow us to address deferred maintenance and support the evolving needs of field scientists without compromising RMBL’s ability to attract a diverse scientific community. We are actively working with the Board of Trustees to develop that model. Until then, RMBL can only make incremental progress toward these longer-term goals.

Other ways you can provide feedback

While we strongly encourage participation in the annual online exit survey, we welcome your feedback at any time. We encourage you to give us your thoughts on pretty much anything, including items you think we have missed, feedback on how we have analyzed the information we received, or how we have prioritized our responses. You can contact Kelly, RMBL’s Chief Operating Officer, at [kelly@rmbll.org](mailto:kelly@rmbll.org) or (970) 349-7736 at any time throughout the year.