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Hello to the RMBL Community,

As part of our desire to keep our community connected with the RMBL Board of Trustees, we (Dan Blumstein, President and Bruce McLean, Chair) write to provide an update on recent accomplishments and discuss future plans. After some opening remarks, we will focus on evaluating our progress towards meeting the goals of our strategic plan (<https://www.rmbl.org/vision/2019-rmbl-strategic-plan/>).

The pandemic affected operations across a wide swath of the American economy in 2020. Organizations, like RMBL, experienced crippling loss of revenue based on operational restrictions imposed by federal, state and local regulation. Based on the extraordinary leadership by our staff, RMBL not only broke even last year, but produced a small budget surplus, despite our operating revenues being drastically reduced because of the inability of many researchers to come to Gothic and our inability to run a community education program. Importantly, were able to keep all of our staff employed.

This extraordinary result was driven by essentially three factors. These three factors were: organizational adaptability in an uncertain environment, attention to the availability of public money via a forgivable loan through the Payroll Protection Program incorporated in the Cares Act, and a significant increase in donor support.

For context, it's essential to realize that while many field stations and marine labs shut down, RMBL led the nation in developing a COVID operations playbook, which was adopted by other institutions and was successful at keeping our staff, students, and researchers safe last summer. Our REU program expanded because we were one of few REU programs able to operate and to do so this required entirely new ways for students to participate (some remotely, some locally, and some on campus) and collaborate. Hats off to Ian, Kelly, Jennie and Rosemary for being extremely creative, flexible, and resilient leaders. Hats off to the rest of our staff for being remarkably supportive of the research and education that occurred last summer. And, a huge thank you to our generous donors, without whose help we would not have been able to break even.

Before we describe our progress towards our strategic plan, it's important to reiterate who we are and what we hope to achieve.

***Vision***-The Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL) will unleash the power of place to transform how we understand the world and provide the scientific knowledge needed to maintain the environmental processes that support food security, air and water quality and human health.

***Mission***-RMBL is a high-elevation station whose principal purpose is to provide quality research for biologists and biology students of all disciplines who can benefit professionally and intellectually from studying at this location. An important further purpose of RMBL is to promote the understanding and protection of the high-altitude ecosystems of Colorado and the watershed of the Gunnison River through the professional activity of its members.

*A major criterion for attendance as a student or as an investigator is the promise of or the fulfillment of quality scientific achievement. A secondary consideration in the selection of a research investigator is whether his or her research can benefit by the research currently being conducted at the RMBL, or whether current RMBL research can be enhanced by the presence of the particular investigator.*

***Strategy and Tactics***-We will transform field biology by being the first field station that explicitly adopts the strategy of using the 'model ecosystem' concept to drive discovery.

*We will further expand our impact by articulating and demonstrating the value of the model ecosystem approach to support field biology so that it's value will be recognized and explicitly implemented around the world, and to help policymakers take full advantage of the knowledge generated by field scientists.*

### **Strategic plan update**

We continue to diversify the nature of science conducted at the RMBL. The DOE-funded SAIL project (<https://arm.gov/news/facility/post/60749>) that starts this year is a two-year atmospheric monitoring program from Los Alamos National Laboratory that will bring new faces and equipment into Gothic and will collect atmospheric data that can be used by others working at RMBL to understand watershed-scale processes.

Dr. Ian Breckheimer was hired to help us make progress in creating a data-rich environment. He's been doing a great job helping to support basic data management as well as creating new tools and data products that will be used by many researchers. He's helping to develop grants that would support his continued work and to enhance the work of others.

Research and research support are strong. Because of successful fundraising, we have doubled, since 2018, the amount of fellowship support given to scientists and graduate students. Research productivity, measured by scientific publications, is strong. The Board is discussing ways to benchmark RMBL's productivity against other institutions and to consider ways to see if our investments are paying dividends in creating novel and meaningful collaborations. At least one multi-lab/multi-authored project is under way. Research conducted at RMBL is getting a fair bit of national and international press, but most of this is opportunistic and not because of strategic investments in enhancing this sort of public engagement.

Our K-12 plan is continuing to develop a year-round program although this was slowed by pandemic-related closures. Gothic improvements have enhanced our ability to support overnight winter Gothic programs and we are close to finalizing permits that will permit us to house minors overnight.

Though not formally a part of our strategic plan, we are working at multiple levels to promote diversity and inclusion in the RMBL community. We established a board-level committee that has been working with the community diversity committee to develop a strategy to further diversity staff and researchers at the RMBL. They have conducted a survey and are analyzing that to provide information that will inform the development of a strategy that will ultimately be incorporated in our strategic plan. The board-level governance committee is working on a plan to diversify our board.

Another objective of the strategic plan is support of scientists in Gothic. In this respect, Crystal Cabin was opened in the fall of 2019 and we expect to break ground on a new NSF-funded cabin this summer. Together this represents approximately \$1 million in new housing in four years which increases our year-round capacity significantly (while still adhering to our 180-person county-imposed occupancy cap). We have increased internet bandwidth by an order of magnitude and improved wastewater management. Plans to replace the washhouse and upgrade of ten cabins are in the works, pending fundraising. The RMBL portal has been created and will provide administrative support to scientists as well as a streamlined user experience for RMBL community members.

In summary, despite the pandemic, which has gripped the world and crippled economies, we have continued to make good progress on the strategic plan and RMBL finances. While operational restrictions caused by pandemic have set back field research across the globe, RMBL has managed to sustain a strong growth trajectory measured by the number of scientists with RMBL-based research, on-site research days and publications, while diversifying the types of science conducted at RMBL.

### **Mt. Crested Butte Campus Update**

Essential parts of the strategic plan will be achieved by developing a year-round campus in what is referred to as the North Village of Mt. Crested Butte. The board and the staff have been

working hard to make progress on this, which will be part of a larger development project near the Fantasy Ranch Stables. The RMBL campus will provide essential housing for our staff, and essential summer housing for our scientists. It will support year-round research and education, and it will create a necessary revenue stream that will be used to support the entire institution. Together, the campus, visitor's center, and transportation center will help manage recreational impacts in the Upper East River Valley.

Despite the pandemic, significant progress has been made on this process over the last year. RMBL and the owners of the parcel, North Village Associates (NVA), have reached an agreement on the location of a parcel within North Village that will be dedicated to the RMBL campus.

Development of the North Village including the RMBL campus requires that a development plan be submitted to The Town of Mt. Crested Butte for approval. In collaboration with NVA, we have been working with the Town Council for over a year and it is anticipated that a formal PUD (planned urban development) application will be submitted in the first quarter of 2021. RMBL scientists as well as a board committee have been working together to assure that the proposed campus addresses the needs of the scientific community. The board committee has interviewed architectural firms and reviewed preliminary design concepts. The committee has emphasized the design quality, site disturbance, sustainability and construction and operating costs. The field has been narrowed and a final decision will be made before the PUD application is filed.

Ultimately, success of the North Village Campus will depend on the success of our capital campaign which will seek to raise funds from public and private sources. The board's development committee has been planning the capital campaign for more than two years and there is measured optimism that the campaign will be successful.

### **Final Thoughts**

2020 by any measure was a very successful year for RMBL. We are all hopeful that 2021 will begin a return to "normal". Last week, RMBL qualified for a second round of PPP support which bolsters our optimism for a strong financial performance again this year. 2021 will likely be pivotal in the development of the North Village Campus. We expect PUD approval, design completion and the launch of fundraising by year end. 2021 should be a very good year indeed.

Dan Blumstein  
Board President

Bruce McLean  
Board Chair