impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

The meat science and innovation center exemplifies the land-grant mission

AT A GLANCE

The University of Idaho Meat Science and Innovation Center Honoring Ron Richard has hosted Extension activities, research projects and student courses since opening in the spring of 2026.

The Situation

The Meat Science and Innovation Center (MSIC) meat science programming needed a new, larger facility to replace the 1960s-era facility that had limited space (5,000 square feet). The meat science team had to move equipment between rooms and could only conduct one aspect of the land-grant mission at a time, which limited the team's impact.



Yufei Guo, Ph.D., leads a tour during the Meat Science and Innovation Center Honoring Ron Richard Grand Opening.

Our Response

Planning for a new facility began over a decade ago with Ron Richard, former manager of Vandal Brand Meats, who passed away in 2018. The new facility spans 12,750 square feet and cost approximately $17.5 million. The new facility includes a classroom with 48-person capacity along with audio-visual technology and an integrated test kitchen.

The enclosed live animal holding pens minimizes weather stress and features grooved flooring to prevent slipping and allow for drainage, a sweep tub for low stress animal handling, screens for ventilation and a scale to collect live animal weights. The harvest floor, or abattoir, features hide-on and hide-off sides separated by a partial wall to minimize contamination and improve food safety. Modern equipment, such as a hide puller, is utilized to better reflect current meat industry standards.

Refrigerated fabrication and processing rooms are utilized for raw products, while a separate room is dedicated to processing ready-to-eat products or pre-cooked products. Double pass-through smokers create this separation which is essential for preventing cross contamination between cooked and raw products.

Other improvements from the previous facility include separate men's and women's locker rooms with full bathrooms; three offices for the manager, assistant managers and USDA inspector; and a retail front for the public to purchase Vandal Brand Meats products to support student scholarships, research and student employees.

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Program Outcomes

From the spring through the fall of 2026, the MSIC has facilitated several activities supporting Extension, teaching and research focusing on experiential learning opportunities for U of I employees and students, 4-H and FFA youth, agriculture professionals and the public.

The MSIC has hosted U of I and WSU classes for a total of 150 students (Table 1). Around 35 undergraduate students were employed at the MSIC in the fall of 2026 while earning their degree. Students graduating from the meat science program have a 100% job placement rate following graduation. The MSIC hosted clubs such as the Student Idaho Cattle Association (40) and the Hot Dog Club (35). Hosted tours for U of I employees from the Alumni Foundation (30), Office of Informational Technology (30) and CALS/Extension (115).

Table 1. Classes utilizing the meat science center.

Course	Number of students
U of I Animal Products for Human Consumption	44
U of I Advanced Meat Fabrication	3
U of I Beef Science, Beef Grading Lab	48
U of I Live Animal and Carcass Evaluation	30
WSU Beef Science, Beef Grading Lab	25

Extension activities for youth in 4-H and FFA, as well as their leaders and advisors, began in February 2026 and reached at least 335 participants. A regional 4-H volunteer training (70) was the first event hosted in the new facility. Additional activities were hosted for Latah County 4-H beef members (15), Idaho FFA Meats Judging (93), Idaho 4-H State Teen Association Convention (80), National 4-H Exchange (21) and the U of I CALS Days (56).

Extension activities for the agricultural industry began in March with the Northwest Meats Processors Convention (134) and the Nez Perce County Cattle Producers meeting (85). Throughout the year, additional workshops and tours were held for the North American Piedmontese Association (45), Washington Cattle Feeders, Beef 301 – Beginning Cattle Producers (30), U.S. Meat Export Federation – Beef 101 (45), Steer-A-Year Donor Banquet, U of I College of Agricultural and Life Sciences 125 Year Celebration (125) and government officials (18). The facility was also utilized to produce six videos for the Washington State Beef Commission and a Harvest Idaho documentary featuring U of I lamb.

A multiyear grant for $479,000 was secured from USDA NIFA to host a series of workshops titled “Beef 101: Pacific Northwest Beginning Rancher Development Program.” Additional meat science research projects this year have evaluated carcass yield losses due to bruising, cardiac issues in feedlot cattle and ultrasound technology predicting carcass traits. The meat science team has also collected beef carcass data from the county fairs in the region to provide youth producers with feedback and evaluate quality.

The Future

Additional funding from USDA NIFA for $500,000 has been requested to facilitate a multiyear project educating ag teachers on butchery techniques and meat science. This spring, the facility will host additional labs as well as tours.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

Thank you to the generous stakeholders and donors who made the Meat Science and Innovation Center possible. Vandal Brand Meats Manager James Nasados and assistant managers, Talia Holtmeyer and Ryan Nelson, as well as graduate students, Yufei Guo, Claire Shaw, Corbin Fornes, Catie McCarthy and Sarah Roberts, for supporting these activities.

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