



Vera C. Rubin Observatory
Rubin Observatory Document

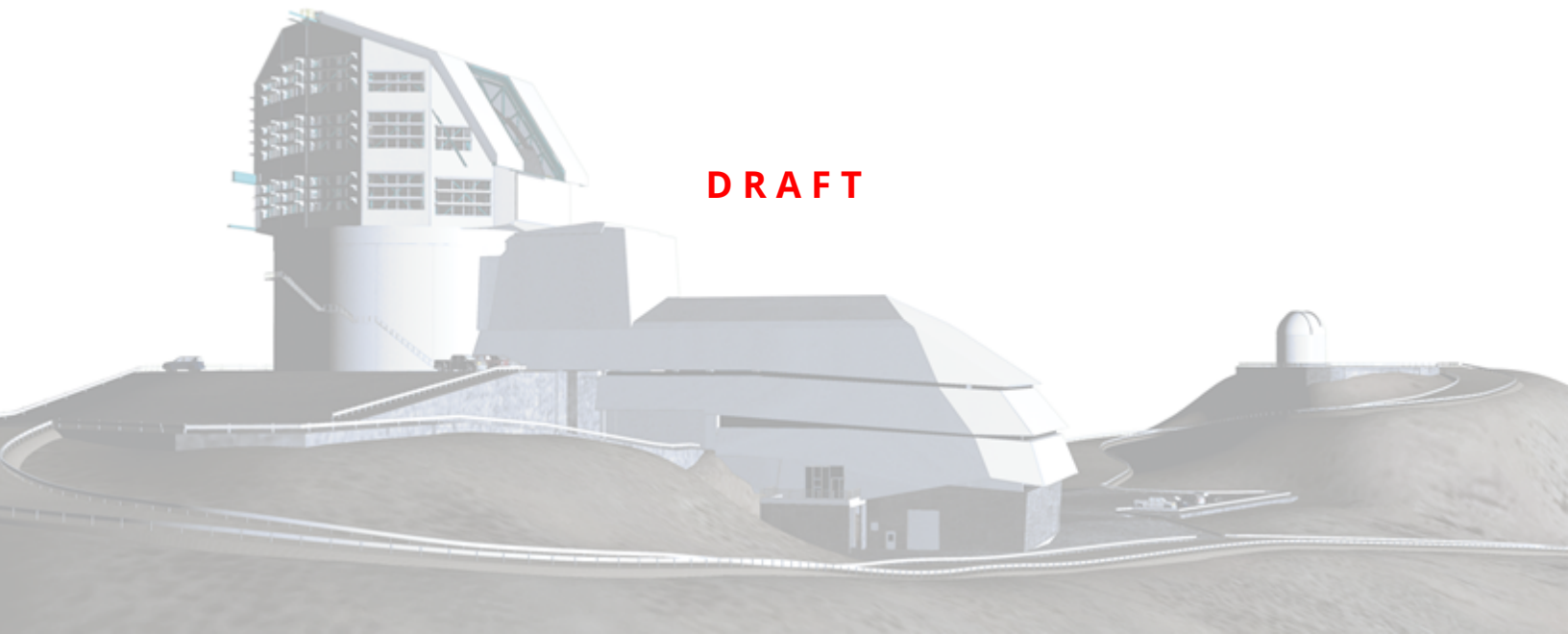
Rubin First Look Public Announcement Strategy

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Abstract

This strategic plan is focused solely on the activities and products needed to produce significant media impact for the first image release (Rubin First Look) from the newly completed Vera C. Rubin Observatory. Later media engagements, and naming and dedication ceremonies in Chile, are planned separately. This document summarizes strategic concepts and guidance while implementation details are described in supporting documents. Rubin First Look public announcement is anticipated for the first half of 2025.

Note: while this document is written in future tense, most of described deliverables are in progress or have been already completed.

Draft

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Rubin First Look Public Announcement Strategy

1 Context, Goals, Stakeholders and Audiences

The term First Look (sometimes First Light) is usually used to signify the release of the first publicly released images from a new telescope (or a new instrument) constructed from calibrated astronomical data after it has been constructed. This is typically not the engineering tests performed to adjust the complex systems, but the first images that pass the requirements and fully illustrate the actual scientific potential of the new system. For Rubin, First Look is an artificial ‘event’ which is just the chosen day of the press release. It is coupled with the construction progress and the progress of the first calibrated observations, but once these are done the detailed date of this event is driven by the progress of the composition and cleaning of color images.

Rubin’s First Look (hereafter RFL), preceded by internal System First Light milestone, will be a pivotal event in the life of the observatory, marking its transition from a technological project to a tool for exploring the Universe. It will demonstrate scientific readiness: confirm that the telescope is operational and capable of capturing scientific data. And it will inspire confidence: assure the scientific community and funding bodies that the project is on track and ready for scientific research.

Strategic planning is a necessity when endeavoring to engage with the media and break through the daily newscycle to reach the broader public. It is imperative not only to provide materials and trained subject matter experts for our media partners, but to also develop relationships long before the actual image release. Success in these activities requires a plan that starts early enough and builds towards the image release in 2025.

This strategic plan outlines both of the elements required: the *products* that need to be created for media and the *strategy for media engagement*. Estimated timelines have been developed as time relative to RFL as the final RFL date is still shifting. RFL public announcement is anticipated for the first half of 2025.

Later media engagements, and naming and dedication ceremonies in Chile, are planned separately.

1.1 Rubin’s mission statement and adjustments for intended audiences

Major advances in our understanding of the universe have historically arisen from dramatic improvements in our ability to “see”. Until recently, most astronomical investigations have focused on small samples of cosmic sources or individual objects. This is because even the largest telescope facilities typically had rather small fields of view, and those with large fields of view could not detect very faint sources. With all of our existing telescope facilities, we have still surveyed only a small fraction of the observable universe (except when considering the most luminous quasars).

However, recent advances in technology (in particular, telescopes, sensors and computers) have made it possible to move beyond the traditional observational paradigm and to undertake large-scale sky surveys. Rubin Observatory was specifically designed and constructed to deliver the most ambitious optical sky survey to date: the Legacy Survey of Space and Time (LSST). The LSST design is driven by four main and broad science themes: probing dark energy and dark matter, taking an inventory of the solar system, exploring the transient optical sky, and mapping the Milky Way. The most unique feature of LSST, compared to previous sky surveys, is an enormous number of detected objects: about 20 billion galaxies and a similar number of stars will be detected – for the first time in history, the number of cataloged celestial objects will exceed the number of living people!

The key aspect of LSST is that all scientific investigations will utilize a common image and catalog databases constructed from an optimized observing program. This program will be not be subject to common Time Allocation Committee but instead will be executed using an essentially autonomous AI program (the so-called LSST Scheduler). LSST data will enable an extremely broad range of new scientific investigations. A particular aspect of Rubin Observatory and LSST is an exquisite software suite that will both run the Observatory and process images (including object finding and measurement of properties such as position, brightness, shape, colors) to science-ready form. The resulting science-ready data products will be distributed to many thousands of scientists around the world, with time-sensitive information about objects that change in brightness or position available within an unprecedentedly short period (60 seconds) after acquiring image.

In addition, the worldwide attention received by outreach tools such as Sky in Google Earth and the World Wide Telescope, and the hundreds of thousands of volunteers classifying galaxies in the Galaxy Zoo project and its extensions, demonstrate that the impact of sky surveys

extends far beyond fundamental science progress and reaches all of society. For this reason, from the very start, the Rubin Observatory Construction project included an Education and Public Outreach (EPO) component which is anticipated to have high impact with the interested public, planetariums and science centers, citizen science projects, as well as middle school through university educational programs. Since its official completion, EPO is now a functional unit of Rubin Operations.

These aspects of Rubin Observatory and LSST led to the following Rubin Mission Statement **“Rubin Observatory’s mission is to build a well-understood system that will produce an unprecedented astronomical data set for studies of the deep and dynamic universe, make the data widely accessible to a diverse community of scientists, and engage the public to explore the Universe with us.”**

While this mission statement succinctly captures all of the primary aspects of Rubin Observatory and LSST, it is not adequate for reaching out to the broadest possible audience (see below for a discussion of intended audiences). A set of key high-level messages designed for broadest possible audiences are discussed in Section 2.

1.2 RFL goals and high-level strategy for achieving them

The RFL images, and accompanying messages, will be designed to make a huge splash, with broad coverage. They will show capability and promise for early science in a manner that deeply engages the public and encourages interest for subsequent early science releases. They will connect familiar phenomena with the unfamiliar Rubin capabilities and create a “wow!”-effect.

The goals of the FL campaign are listed here in order of priority:

1. Capture a high level of media attention (among mainstream media including Chilean media, as well as astronomy-focused media)
 - Objective #1: Rubin images are featured “above the fold” in a major US newspaper
 - Objective #2: Rubin images are featured “above the fold” in a major Chilean newspaper
 - Objective #3: At least one viral post on social networks

2. Demonstrate Rubin’s unique, substantial, and awe-inspiring science potential to the world
 - Objective #1: Your neighbors have heard of Rubin Observatory the day after release of first light images
 - Objective #2: Media stories are still regularly being written about Rubin 6 months after release of first light images
3. Acknowledge funding organizations whose contributions made Rubin Observatory a reality
 - Objective #1: Funding agencies sufficiently acknowledged for their support within FL media products
 - Objective #2: Funding agencies credited by media

1.3 RFL stakeholders

Key stakeholders include NSF, DOE, AURA, SLAC, NOIRLab, LSST DA, and AURA-O.

1.4 Intended audiences

The RFL audiences are listed here in order of priority:

1. News media, national and international – engaged through communications products
2. Funding stakeholders and decision makers from the Congress and federal agencies (NSF and DOE)
3. Broad public, the science and technology-attentive public – engaged through media, websites, social media
4. Potential Rubin users and citizen scientists, educators

1.5 Definitions of closely related Rubin events

There are several Rubin milestones/events that are similar, or sound similar, so these brief definitions are intended to avoid confusion:

- *Rubin First Photon*: The first on-sky image obtained with LSSTCam on the Simonyi Survey Telescope. It is a well-defined in time and anticipated in January/February of 2025. This first image is not expected to be of scientific quality but it will mark the start of the full-system commissioning and operational optimization.
- *System First Light*: It is defined by image quality, with emphasis on delivered seeing. Nominally expected about 2 months after Rubin First Photon. It will be declared days if not weeks after the actual data were taken. Decision to declare it may be coupled with an end-to-end data processing effort and its success. Decision to declare it will be made by the Rubin Construction Directorate and Project Management Office, as recommended by the Project Science Team.
- *Rubin First Look*: Public release of System First Light data products (and supporting media products and events, culminating with a Press Conference). This is the event discussed in this document. It is nominally expected about 3 weeks after System First Light data were declared.

2 Design Guidance and List of RFL Products

2.1 Key high-level messages

Key high-level messages will capture the essence of Rubin Observatory and LSST, and will be consistent with Rubin’s mission statement discussed above. Furthermore, these messages will adhere to the following principles:

- Messages should focus on, e.g., why this news should be “above the NYT fold”
- There should be no jargon (like “system”)
- Messages should make things as understandable as possible for media (sound bites)
- Include “familiar equivalences” that people can understand (e.g., DKIST sees solar structure the size of Texas; in Rubin’s case, such equivalences and other analogies will be crucial to capture the size and complexity of its dataset)
- Use a single name to refer to the observatory, camera and survey. Initial: NSF–DOE Vera C. Rubin Observatory thereafter Rubin.

- Refer to other names (LSST Camera, Simonyi Survey Telescope) ONLY when necessary, preferably only in the “about” section after the main release).

Key high-level messages should be organized in

1. Primary messages about Rubin First Look
2. Secondary messages about Rubin First Look and more generally about Rubin and LSST

These key high-level messages should be completed (apart from embargoed details about the actual RFL dataset) well before the RFL event. We note that NSF and DOE have communicated to Rubin their desire to collaborate on developing key talking points.

2.2 Images and image-based products

The most successful past image releases from major telescopes were not only stunning visually, but also told a story scientifically. The team developing this plan and those executing it should remember that it is the scientific potential that captures the media and public attention. The RFL release is not intended to showcase actual publishable science results, but provide the most evocative images possible to illustrate Rubin’s wide-field, high cadence and amazing science potential. Using such proxies is also important as so-called Science press releases will need to be based on peer-reviewed science papers.

There are huge expectations from Rubin stakeholders for this event – most people are envisioning a splash similar to what JWST and Event Horizon Telescope achieved. Yes, we need to acknowledge that Rubin’s images will not be even remotely as spectacular as those from JWST (or even from DKIST) because of space-based resolution vs. ground-based resolution difference. Indeed, Rubin Observatory is not designed to produce spectacular images; its purpose is to produce **a very large number of very large images** with ground-based (mediocre, by space standards) resolution. In some sense, an ultimate celebratory moment will be something like “LSST’s last photon” in 2035, rather than first photons and First Look in 2025 because **it is the final LSST dataset that will be unprecedented and impressive but not Rubin’s first light images.**

Given that fact, the best strategy to attract and excite media rests on two important pillars:

1. Do not rely solely on static images but use tools for zoom in/out to convey simultaneously large field of view and many pixels
2. Showcase time domain aspects and unprecedented Rubin's etendue (about 100 times faster surveying speed than other 8m telescopes)
3. As an extend goal, introduce Rubin software and AI-powered data interpretation ("astronomers cannot look at so many images, but computers can!")

The Images Working Group (see Section 4.3) is charged with designing and executing an observing program that will follow this strategic guidance and produce a dataset and data products that will maximize the success of RFL.

Note that this discussion intentionally avoids embargoed details (see Section 4.5).

2.3 Press kit

In addition to the actual RFL image-based products, an informative, self-contained, detailed and easy to use Press Kit will be a crucial product to ensure RFL success. Its purpose is to inform the media about Rubin Observatory and provide them with all the material they need to easily write stories and social media posts about Rubin, and ultimately about the RFL images. In other words, the Press Kit needs to make the media's job covering Rubin as easy as possible. The Press Kit will be created in both English and Spanish.

Many publications no longer have dedicated science writers, so the information in the Rubin Press Kit must be ready for them to use "as is" and should be written for a non-science audience. That means the text should be free of jargon, and all science concepts must be explained in non-specialist language. In addition, readily understandable comparisons, analogies and equivalencies are strongly recommended for the media who will be creating content for general audiences (e.g., one Rubin image is the size of 45 full moons).

The Press Kit will include:

- Press Release text (including embargo information)
- Information about and pointers to image-based products and tools, discussed above.

- Pre-recorded short video interviews with selected Rubin team members and expert scientists (see Section 3.7)
- Rubin textual background information (see below).
- Videos about Rubin Observatory and LSST science.
- Additional pointers, such as weblinks, to additional more detailed and specialist information (e.g., software pipelines, Rubin image gallery, Rubin YouTube channel).
- Contact list of media-trained cadre of scientists and engineers for interviews on specific topics

This Press Kit will be made available for download in a single collated, printable and linked pdf document, as well as website text that is easy to navigate.

2.4 Rubin Background Information

The Press Kit will also include extensive and appropriate textual background information.

The background information will be organized by general topic, and written in brief sentences that can be used as sound-bites for in-person interviews. These are similar to key high-level messages discussed above, but are typically longer and/or more detailed, and can be used as supplementary material to support the key messages.

Topics will include Rubin Observatory, Simonyi Survey Telescope, LSST Camera, Data Facility, LSST Software, LSST survey, Science, People, Funding, Name, History of Rubin Observatory, Rubin Superlatives. This background information will be made available in a single collated, printable and linked pdf document, as well as website text that is easy to navigate.

3 The Media Engagement Strategy

3.1 RFL Communication Channels

The RFL impact will be maximized with maximized number of communication channels. The channels under our control include

- Press releases
- Expert interviews
- Media visits
- AURA/Rubin/NOIRLab/NSF/SLAC/DOE social media incl. for live streaming of the main press conference
- AURA/Rubin/NOIRLab/NSF/SLAC/DOE websites
- Auxiliary channels such as Reddit, Quora, and Ted Talks.

“External” channels that not under our control include

- Print Media (for general public: newspapers, websites, etc.)
- Broadcast media
- Social media
- Scientific trade publications (Sky & Telescope, Scientific American etc.)

All communication products will be created in both English and Spanish.

Communication products are needed for, or build towards, the images and press release for the FL images. They fall into some main categories listed below. Each of the deliverables will have their own more detailed planning documents.

3.2 Momentum building prior to RFL event

Momentum building activities are important to build a following of people interested in the Rubin Observatory before the first light images are released. These activities also include educating the media and the public about the scientific goals of Rubin and its amazing technical achievements.

Some momentum building activities include:

- Organizational press releases focusing on construction milestones
- Topical press releases focusing on the various science areas and featuring prominent Rubin scientists
- Exhibits and interviews at winter AAS January 2025
- Exhibits and interviews at summer AAS June 2025
- General ramp-up of (reactive) ongoing in-person Media visits to the summit.

3.3 Media engagement prior to RFL event

Engaging with the media early and often will help ensure a successful RFL. The goal is to make it easy for the media to gain access to “behind the scenes” information that they can use in their stories. Virtual tours and Q&A panels are a way to include those members of the media who cannot travel to the observatory in Chile. These events will also build relationships between the communications team and the media for future coverage of the observatory.

The process can be similar to NASA’s media engagement. A call to the media can be sent out via email and on social media one week before the event. Those who want to attend the tour via zoom or telephone and ask questions will need to register in advance. Those who do not register can still view the tour via, e.g., Rubin’s YouTube channel.

Some possible events include:

- Virtual media tours
- Social media days
- Proactive in-person group media visits to the summit arranged in preselected slots with a curated experience
- Virtual panels for Rubin Q&A (Who: Rubin user/scientist, Rubin engineer, Rubin comms person; Why: opportunity to ask general questions)

3.4 Press conference

NSF and DOE have informed Rubin team that NSF is interested and capable of running the primary press conference for RFL and definitely envision it taking place either at the NSF HQ or at the National Press Club (where they have the infrastructure, experience and staff to do such a conference to the right protocols and with the expected remote and in-person engagement of press).

Press conference in D.C. will be the primary RFL media event. The RFL team should engage NSF and DOE in discussion to position the formal press conference with parallel and associated activities.

Media events, especially embargoed ones, will help get the attention of the press for the RFL event. Embargoes allow the press to prepare their stories ahead of the actual release date so when the images are released the media stories are also ready to go. NSF has a press list of trusted media contacts that can be the starting point for the invites to the embargoed press release.

The key RFL media engagement steps will be executed in this order:

1. Outreach to key media contacts
2. Embargoed “Get Ready for Rubin” Press conference: “Background” virtual press conference held in conjunction with NSF, DOE, following:
 - Embargoed release without images distributed one day prior
 - Invite for this virtual press conference sent to trusted journalists
 - Panel of experts will answer press questions
3. Images released to embargo group 2 hours before general release
4. Primary Priority: Main in-person press conference day of image release
 - Hosted jointly by NSF and DOE in Washington DC (work with NSF to secure the National Press Club, which was the site of the Event Horizon Telescope and Gravitational Wave Optical Follow-up events)
 - Invite to go out to embargo and non-embargo press and via social media

- Aim for noon Eastern to enable supporting events in Europe and further west, to Pacific time zone (see below)
- 5. Secondary Priority: Concurrent press conference in Santiago, in person and streamed from Primary site
- 6. Tertiary Priority: press event could be streamed live to various other venues (see below)
- 7. Post-RFL follow-up media interviews

The 'point-of-no-return' RFL moment will be the date of the Media advisory announcement. The decision about executing this step will undergo a review (SFL Media Alert Gate review).

3.5 Supporting hub events

Given the exquisite preparations for the RFL and extensive resulting media products, it will be relatively easy to organize an event concurrent with the press conference in D.C. The essential driver is to use the main event to trigger and partially support a local event, which would also showcase local Rubin aspects (construction and operations work, Science Collaborations, local EPO interests, etc.). The main press release text could be easily modified to allow room for specific local content (including quotes) and promote local organizations.

A number of groups have already expressed interest (a number of hubs in US, several hubs in UK and France, also hubs from Italy, Hungary, Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia). The team should keep them engaged and informed about progress, and send Press Kit and detailed timing for the main press conference to them as soon as they are available.

3.6 Social networks

In the lead up to the RFL image release it is important to build and engage with the social media audiences. Many of our stakeholders are active in social media in addition to consuming traditional and new media. A campaign that tells the story of Rubin and the science it will do will get our audience excited for the RFL images.

The team should have a brainstorming session to create the strategy and stories to tell. Some elements include:

- Strategy for lead up to RFL press release
- Images
- Text (alt and main)
- Graphics
- Videos
- Outreach to influencers

We note that NSF and DOE plan to amplify Rubin stories on their social media feeds.

3.7 Interviews and Spokespeople Preparation

Pre-recorded short video interviews with selected Rubin team members and expert scientists will be included in the Press Kit.

It is essential to provide media training for all people who will be identified for interviews. Even if they have previous experience with the media, this training will inform them of Rubin specific messaging and topics to avoid. After people for interviews have been selected, the team will provide to them

- Media training
- Rubin slide deck (both for spokespeople and general members of the scientific community)
- Main messages and talking points (consistent with key high-level messages, see Section 2.1)

3.8 Metrics for measuring success and their aspirational goals

The following metrics have been used before, both by Rubin and other teams, to measure the success of press releases and other media campaigns:

- Front page(s) of major newspaper(s) in US and Chile (goal: at least one in each country)

- Near the top of trending on social media in the US and Chile (goal: at least in the top 5)
- Meltwater’s “number of theoretical readership” metric for all articles covering the RFL should be in billions (over 4 billion to be comparable to the EHT metric).
- Number of visits to main Rubin-related websites should increase by at least 50%
- Number of visits to Rubin’s YouTube channel should increase by at least 50%
- A famous non-scientist talks about Rubin (e.g., President, ISS Astronaut, major influencer, etc.)
- Several memes get significant attention on social media
- A measureable impact on Google search trend
- Mentioned in major TV news
- Rubin is the google search image for day

Note that these goals, though based on prior experience, are aspirational since most are beyond our direct control. The most meaningful metrics and measures of success will be those that can be compared to other similar events (e.g. Event Horizon Telescope announcement in 2019, see https://www.capjournal.org/issues/26/26_11.pdf).

4 Team Organization, Roles & Responsibilities, Schedule

The RFL event is being planned and organized by a team that includes staff members from many stakeholder institutions with relevant expertise and experience. Early RFL team organization initially reflected existing organizational Rubin Construction and Operations staff units, but recently it was reorg-ed to improve coordination with experts from other organizations, such as AURA, SLAC, NOIRLab’s CEE and LSST DA.

4.1 Rubin Celebration Organizing Committee

Rubin Celebration Organizing Committee (RCOC) is an overarching committee designed to assure input from all key stakeholders, and progress reporting to all stakeholders, in the context of both FL release and two dedication ceremonies (the Simonyi Survey Telescope naming ceremony and the Rubin Observatory dedication ceremony)

4.2 System First Light Coordination Group

System First Light Coordination Group (SFLcg) is charged to coordinate the work of three working groups described below, track their progress, and report it back to the RCOG. For historic reasons, this group's is named after System First Light rather than Rubin First Look. The SFLcg is chaired by the Construction Project Director (Željko Ivezić).

4.3 RFL Working Groups

There are three principal working groups charged to design the RFL content, produce it, package it for distribution, and distribute it to media and public. They include

- Images WG is charged with planning the observing strategy and processing for the FL images. The IWG is chaired by the Rubin Project Scientist (Steve Ritz).
- EPO WG is charged to produce, or coordinate the production of, all RFL products other than image-based products. The EPO WG derives its name from the fact that most of its members are recruited from the homonymous unit of the Rubin Operations and it is co-chaired by the EPO Head (Alan Strauss) and the Rubin Science Writer (Kristen Metzger).
- Communications WG is charged with further developing and implementing the media engagement strategy outlined in this document. It is chaired by the Head of Rubin Communications (Ranpal Gill).

These working groups include about 30 people who are mostly staff from the Rubin Construction Project and Rubin Operations, representatives from all stakeholders, and also include experts from AURA HQ and NOIRLab's CEE with relevant experience and expertise. The RFL team is a "badgeless Rubin team" working together to achieve goals described in this document.

In order to better illustrate their expected deliverables, here is an incomplete but representative list for each WG:

Images WG deliverables:

- choose the observing strategy and targets

- produce processed RFL images and image-based products
- add sonification and alt-text (with EPO/Comms teams)
- help with narrative for the Press Release
- pre-RFL end-to-end tests (e.g., utilizing ComCam as pathfinder)
- communicate and coordinate with other relevant teams and committees (in particular, with the Rubin Project Science Team and NOIRLab's CEE)

EPO WG deliverables:

- deliver momentum building "Science Stories" series
- produce RFL Press Kit
- produce educational video clips about Rubin
- deliver sonification and alt-text for RFL images

Communications WG deliverables:

- distribute momentum building "Science Stories" series
- produce RFL Press Release
- distribute RFL Press Kit
- develop social network strategy and management
- lead the media momentum building (including social networks and influencers)
- lead coordination with "RFL hubs"
- RFL success tracking

We emphasize that these lists are incomplete. The ownership and schedule (milestones) for the complete lists of deliverables are managed by professional management tools (the RFL effort is "projectized"). They are tracked and their progress discussed in supporting documents.

4.4 Decision making and approval process

The SFLcg is empowered to make all the decisions required for efficient execution of the RFL project. They are encouraged to take broad input from various stakeholders and keep the RCOG informed about the progress.

An approval process of RFL products that is efficient but complete will allow all products to be created in a timely fashion. All written and visual RFL communications products will be approved following the standard process established for the momentum-building background science press releases.

4.5 Embargo policies and responsibilities

To ensure the confidentiality and integrity of sensitive information within our collaboration prior to the official public RFL release, the following embargo policy, derived from the Rubin document “Information Sharing during Commissioning” by Keith Bechtol & Steve Ritz (2024; <https://sitcomtn-076.lsst.io/>), is in effect.

All Rubin, AURA and SLAC staff, as well as Rubin community members working on observations, data management, EPO, communications etc. shall adhere to the following rules of confidentiality.

All specific information about RFL imaging products is deemed confidential until the embargo expires at the time of the RFL press release. Specific information about RFL images and targets can only be shared with the people involved in the RFL campaign. Nothing specific about RFL shall be shared outside, including on social media. General information about RFL can be shared with the community, for instance at Rubin Community Workshops, e.g. “The System First Light observations will be taken over a 3-week period currently slated to start in March 2025. Several targets will be observed depending on their visibility at the time of observation, and their suitability to demonstrate various aspects of Rubin Observatory. Several committees consisting of experts are working on different aspects of Rubin First Look event, in order to maximize the press and social media visibility.”

The Rubin Construction Director will maintain the list of personnel with access. A subset of staff working on the press release images will be the only ones who are granted access to

image products. Access to embargoed information is limited to essential personnel only. Secure methods for sharing information will be applied (e.g., encrypted emails, access controlled documents etc). All embargoed documents and images will be marked with “CONFIDENTIAL”.

Embargoed information shall not be printed unless absolutely necessary. Any printed materials shall be stored in locked and secure locations. Printed materials should be disposed via secure shredding methods after the embargo period.

All media inquiries should be directed to the designated media liaisons. No staff or community members shall provide comments or information about FL to colleagues or to the media before the embargo lift date.

All suspected or actual breaches of this policy should be immediately reported to Rubin Construction Director. Violations of this policy may result in disciplinary actions, including termination of access to the RFL project.

The Rubin Construction Director is responsible for enforcing this policy and ensuring compliance.

Exceptions to this policy can only be granted by the Rubin Construction Director in writing and after informing the SFLcg.