INL News Release
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Preparations for INL's 2013 fire season under way

IDAHO FALLS — The Fire Department at the U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho National Laboratory is preparing for the 2013 wildland fire season. Every spring, the fire department reviews its fire preparation procedures and lessons learned from previous fires. By doing this, firefighters are better prepared to protect people, property and the environment at the desert Site from future wildland fires.

Fire danger normally increases as the grasses and sagebrush dry during the summer on INL's 890 square miles of high desert land west of Idaho Falls.

"INL experienced little snow pack this winter," INL Fire Chief Eric Gosswiller said. "The grassy fuels from last season are still standing, moving into this year. The wildfire fuels on INL's property will typically support large fire development as things dry out in July and August. I don't expect this year to be any different. When we hit those critical wildfire fuel conditions, our seasonal fire experience is dependent upon the temperatures, storms and lightning we experience in those late summer months."

INL's experienced and well-trained fire department and emergency response organization have demonstrated the ability to effectively respond to the large wind-driven fires that occur on the desert. In 2012, the Midway Fire burned more than 8,000 acres. In 2011, the T-17 Fire burned more than 50,000 acres on the Site. In 2010, the Jefferson Fire burned more than 100,000 acres. Since 1994, the INL Site has averaged six fires a year and a seasonal total fire acreage of more than 15,500 acres. Throughout this period, the INL Site experienced no significant facility damage. Defensible space buffer zones containing little or no fire fuel exist around major buildings and facility complexes.

INL has a well trained fire department with extensive wildland firefighting experience as a result of the large fires that periodically occur at the desert Site. "I am very confident in the capabilities of our personnel," Gosswiller said. "We view each fire as a learning opportunity to further improve our response tactics while ensuring firefighter safety. We've also focused on improving our coordination with BLM and other agencies that assist INL in these large fires."

Three fire stations are located at the INL Site, each with wildland firefighting equipment. The fire department maintains four heavy, Type 4 wildland fire engines and a 3,000-gallon water tender. Wildland firefighting units are outfitted with onboard compressed-air foam systems capable of making heavy, clinging or water-saturated foam that suppresses and blankets flames and protects exposures.

Additional heavy equipment, including bulldozers for fire line construction, is available from the INL fleet to support wildland firefighting. INL keeps at least 22 firefighting staff on duty at all times. If additional responders are needed, the fire department will recall off-duty employees to bring its force up to 75 qualified wildland firefighters.

If more equipment and/or workers are needed, INL has reciprocal firefighting agreements with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service and most regional fire departments including but not limited to the cities of Idaho Falls, Blackfoot, Shelley, Pocatello, Arco, American Falls, Chubbuck, Madison County, and Central Fire District.

Additional planned actions, as conditions warrant, to reduce the dangers of a wildland range fire this summer, are:

- Annual wildland fire hazard and vegetation assessments
- Aggressive vegetation control along facility perimeters and interconnecting roadways
- Fire danger advisories to all INL employees about the high fire potential and precautions they need to take
- Fire restrictions regarding the use of off-road vehicles and off-road activities
- Constant "real-time" weather monitoring stations
- Heavy equipment (bulldozers, scrapers, water tenders, etc.) maintained in readiness for wildland fire response
- Heavy-equipment operators trained for wildland fire response
- Restrictions on hot work activities (welding, etc.) outside facility perimeters, and
- Maintenance of defensible spaces around important structures and equipment

INL's electrical power loop is redundant, so during wildland fires, power supplies are redirected and maintained. Major Site areas have emergency backup power supplies.

The INL Emergency Operations Center in Idaho Falls and all major facilities at the Site maintain a fully trained and qualified response organization. Emergency control centers are located at each major facility complex. During a wildland fire, these groups are able to ensure timely communications with firefighting responders and execute necessary protective actions for INL facilities.

Risks to radiological facilities and important buildings at INL are manageable because of natural and constructed firebreaks, the predominant use of noncombustible construction materials, and the presence of reliable water supplies and automatic fire suppression systems at the site.

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