DOE News Release
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 31, 2006

MEDIA CONTACT:
John Walsh (208) 526-8646

Preparations for INL's 2006 fire season under way

Firefighters at the U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho National Laboratory are preparing for the wildland fire season. Every spring, the INL Fire Department reviews its fire preparation procedures and lessons learned from previous fires. This information is used to protect Site workers, property and environment from rangeland fires.

Fire danger on INL's 890 square miles of high desert land west of Idaho Falls is expected to become extreme as the grasses and sagebrush continue to dry during the drought conditions this summer.

INL Fire Marshal Eric Gosswiller said, "The region and INL have experienced substantial precipitation over the past 18 months. This has significantly reduced the overall drought condition in the region, but brings mixed blessings for the 2006 wildland fire season. Above average fire potential is predicted for INL because of the presence of abundant carry-over fuel from last year, coupled with significant new growth this spring. Regardless of the conditions, we'll be prepared to respond to fires."

INL has an experienced and well-trained fire department that has proven itself during numerous range fires in the past. For example, in 1999, a blaze consumed more than 40,500 acres of grass and sagebrush near the Materials and Fuels Complex, and in 2000, a blaze consumed more than 30,000 acres near the Reactor Technology Complex. Since 1994, 10 significant wildland fires have occurred at INL. None caused injuries to people or damage to facilities.

Three fire stations are located at the INL Site, each equipped with range firefighting equipment. The fire department maintains four heavy wildland trucks and a 2,000-gallon all-wheel-drive water tender. Heavy wildland firefighting units are outfitted with high-tech onboard compressed-air foam systems capable of making heavy, clinging, or water-saturated foam that suppresses and blankets flames.

Additional equipment is available from INL fleet and subcontractors to support wildland firefighting. INL keeps at least 22 firefighters on duty. If additional workers are needed, the fire department will recall off-duty employees to bring its force up to 93 people. Of these, 75 are qualified as wildland firefighters.

If more equipment and/or workers are needed, INL has reciprocal firefighting agreements with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management; the cities of Idaho Falls, Blackfoot, Pocatello, Arco, Rexburg, American Falls, Chubbuck and Rigby; and fire protection districts in Shelley/Firth, Jefferson Central and Fort Hall.

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

- Aggressive vegetation control along facility perimeters and interconnecting roadways
- Wildland fire hazard and vegetation assessments
- 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
- Constant "real-time" weather monitoring stations
- Heavy equipment (bulldozers, scrapers, water tenders, etc.) to be 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
- A 30-foot defensible space established around important structures and equipment, and
- Maintaining defensible spaces around important structures and equipment.

INL's electrical power loop is redundant so during wildland fires, power supplies are redirected before a line fault occurs. Major Site areas have emergency backup power supplies.

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 or command posts are located at each major facility. During a wildland fire, these groups are able to ensure timely communications with people at the scene of the blaze.

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.

INL is a nuclear energy and multidisciplinary national laboratory dedicated to supporting the U.S. Department of Energy's missions in energy, national security and science. INL is operated for the DOE by Battelle Energy Alliance.

Visit our Web site at www.inl.gov

-INL-06-022-

News Release Archive