

# INL to set up 'Trailhead East' in Idaho Falls

By: Sharon Fisher January 20, 2020 0



Idaho National Laboratory hasn't picked out a site for its Trailhead East incubator space but it's likely to be in this area. Photo by Sharon Fisher

IDAHO FALLS – Idaho National Laboratory (INL) has received a one-year grant to set up a center to facilitate the creation of commercial products from technologies developed from research at the lab, modeled after and partnering with Boise's Trailhead incubator space.

In homage, the space will be called Trailhead East @ Idaho National Lab.

"There's not a huge innovation ecosystem in Idaho Falls," said Jim Keating, commercialization and entrepreneurial programs manager for INL. "We want to play an integral role."

## How the project came about

The project is receiving funding through Practices to Accelerate the Commercialization of Technology (PACT) from the Department of Energy's Office of Technology Transitions, after a call for proposals about six months ago. The project received \$175,000 from PACT, plus INL and Trailhead are contributing \$96,000 of in-kind contributions, for a total budget of \$271,000.

While the grant will last for only this year, the lab is looking on this as a pilot in the hopes that it will attract industry partners and become self-sustaining, Keating said, adding that it was the only project of its kind to receive PACT funding.

The initial cohort – for which the lab is now taking applications – will be five teams, each of which will receive \$15,000 to begin to identify customers or industrial partners, Keating said. That amount largely pays for the staffers' time to be away from the lab to conduct customer interviews and refine their business model, using the Stanford University Lean Launchpad method, he said.

"It's a really effective approach," he said. "Instead of spending millions to develop technology, first you validate that there's a market."

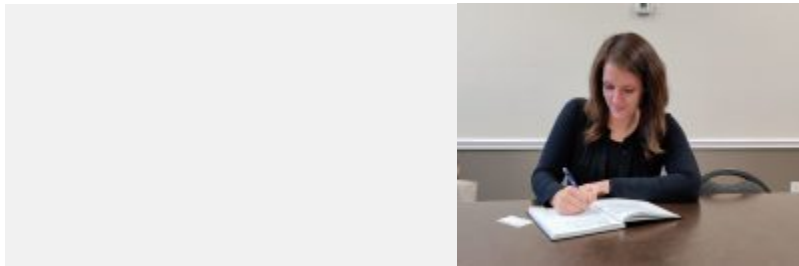
The program itself is considered a continuation of the Energy Innovation Corps. (I-Corps.), a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy that is intended to help engineers and scientists from national labs commercialize technologies they have developed, Keating said.

Of the five cohorts, two teams will be chosen, each of which will receive \$28,000 to continue the process of developing a market for the technology. Part of that process will be to attend a pitch competition in Boise in early December.

"We're hoping with one of the two teams that at least one will land an industrial partner," Keating said.

Teams could also attend Boise Startup Week, he added.

### **Effect on Idaho Falls**



Dana Briggs. Photo by Sharon Fisher

Keating said the center is also expected to help expand Idaho Falls' economic development opportunities.

Dana Briggs, economic development director for Idaho Falls, said she is happy that INL received grant funding "to move forward projects that help the technologies developed at INL serve market needs."

"I personally have been impressed with the work Trailhead Boise does and am excited that Idaho National Laboratory will be partnering with them to foster our local innovation ecosystem," she said in an email message.

While Idaho Falls already has the Idaho Innovation Center, which is currently in the process of raising money to construct a new building, this project is different and complementary, Keating said.

"This isn't done in exclusion," he said. "Any time you're building an ecosystem, the more the merrier. We need all efforts."

Keating also noted that the INL workers intended to be participating in Trailhead East are different.

“These are not your typical entrepreneur who can quit their job and start a company,” he said.

Much of the work they will be doing at Trailhead East will be customer validation and interviews with people from industry.

“A lot of technology requires considerable effort transferring it from the lab to business,” he said.

INL has not yet committed to a Trailhead East location, but it is likely to be in the downtown area, “not too far from the Snakebite [Restaurant],” Keating said.

Keating wasn’t sure what sort of technologies or products could result from the program.

“It could be anything,” he said. “We’ll know once we start seeing applications. We’re trying to cast a wide net.”