

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated 6/11/09

Q: What's the difference between fires that are "contained," "controlled" or "out?"

Answer: A fire described as CONTAINED means a fuel break has been completed around the fire perimeter. A CONTROLLED fire means complete extinguishment of the fire, including spot fires, or the fire line has been strengthened such that flare-ups from within the perimeter of the fire will not break through the line. When a fire is described as OUT, the fire has been completely extinguished with no remaining hot spots.

Q: What is different about fighting a wildland fire on a nuclear reservation, such as Idaho National Laboratory, as opposed to "regular" rangeland?

Answer: Wildland firefighting tactics on the INL desert Site are essentially the same as those used by the Bureau of Land Management and other wildland fire management agencies. INL uses both direct tactics (spraying water or foam on a fire) and indirect suppression tactics (creating buffers or back burn areas) based on the behavior of the fire.

INL's wildland firefighting priorities are first, safety of firefighters, second protecting the area where the wildland and facilities meet (called the wildland-urban interface) and third, protecting natural and cultural resources to the extent feasible by using minimum impact suppression tactics.

Q: What danger does radioactive contamination pose to firefighters? What about contamination to the public?

Answer: Conservative evaluations of the INL desert indicate that when wildfires burn anywhere on the Site, there is no significant risk of radiological or chemical releases.

Parts of the desert Site were used during World War II as a naval gunnery range. From this activity, there are five known areas of live (unexploded) ordnance still on the desert. Generally, firefighters are kept out of these areas. All firefighters are provided with response maps that show known ordnance areas.

For information on the radioactive contaminants expected during a fire, see the Wildland Fire Information fact sheet.

Q: What does a firefighter take into the field during a fire?

Answer: Firefighters must have required communications and approved personal protective equipment. These include, but are not limited to: a radio, fire-resistant clothing and footwear, helmet, gloves, protective eyewear, a fire shelter and water canteen. As noted in the previous answer, all firefighters are provided with a response map that provides critical hazard communication information, including known ordnance areas.

Q: What is done to protect facilities, particularly nuclear facilities, from wildland fires?

Answer: A number of factors come into play in protecting nuclear facilities from wildland fires. These buildings are made of noncombustible materials, such as concrete

and steel. Facilities are equipped with automatic fire sprinkler systems. Substantial defensible spaces and firebreaks are maintained around facilities. Firefighting resources, including water supplies and adequate firefighter access to facilities, are maintained.

Q: What training do INL firefighters have for dealing with wildland fires?

Answer: INL has 75 employees trained as wildland firefighters with 22 firefighters on duty at all times. Their training and qualifications are consistent with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group. INL can call in additional Site staff as needed and INL has access to additional support and equipment through mutual aid and assistance agreements with surrounding communities and federal agencies.

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