



Citizens Advisory Board
Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory

Rehabilitation of Areas Affected by Wildfire

Lying within the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory (INEEL) boundaries (but outside the fence lines of the various INEEL facilities) is one of the few remaining large blocks of high-quality high-desert sagebrush steppe habitat in Idaho. Every effort should be taken to protect the high quality nature of this habitat. Its current lack of noxious weeds and its importance to native species such as sage grouse, pronghorn, and elk, make it an extremely valuable resource.

Since 1996, wildfires have burned large areas of high desert sagebrush steppe habitat in Idaho, including 49,000 acres managed by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) at the INEEL in 2000.¹ According to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), over 500,000 acres of the 700,000-acre Big Desert ecosystem, an area surrounding and contiguous with the INEEL, has burned in the last three years. These fires killed sagebrush that served as a critical habitat component for several species, including sage grouse.

BLM notes research findings showing that little or no viable seed remains after wildfires and that new sagebrush stands must be established from adjacent seed sources. In large fires (such as those that occurred on or near the INEEL during the 2000 fire season) there is no adjacent source of sagebrush seedstock and therefore natural reestablishment of sagebrush is an extremely slow process. Given current concerns regarding the sagebrush ecosystem and the wildlife species that depend upon it, waiting for natural regeneration is unacceptable.

The BLM manages land all around the INEEL. As a federal land management agency, wildfire suppression and rehabilitation is a major focus of the BLM mission. DOE should draw from this experience to ensure a more coordinated and consistent approach.

The INEEL CAB recommends that DOE:

- Follow through on a verbal commitment (made to the INEEL CAB at its meeting on November 15, 2000) to conduct aerial re-seeding of sagebrush using certified weed-free sagebrush seed using DOE funds.
- Coordinate closely with the BLM in the future to secure "emergency rehabilitation funds" and conduct rehabilitation activities in areas damaged by recent wildfires in the Big Desert sagebrush steppe ecosystem (which includes lands administered by both agencies).

¹ The INEEL CAB wishes to acknowledge the successful fire suppression efforts of INEEL personnel.

- Initiate a cooperative fire rehabilitation agreement (i.e., memorandum of understanding) to identify roles and responsibilities for an effective team. This team should strive to effectively manage cheatgrass, firebreaks, and wildfire rehabilitation (to restore land and plant communities in and around the INEEL following wildfires). We recommend that the team should include DOE, BLM, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, and (if appropriate) the Idaho Department of Lands and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We further recommend that such a cooperative agreement be negotiated and signed before the next fire season and address the concerns of INEEL and all other parties to the agreement.
- Evaluate the feasibility of harvesting sagebrush seed within the INEEL boundaries to ensure a reliable source of local seedstock.

References:

- Idaho Sage Grouse Task Force. 1997. Idaho sage grouse management plan - 1997. Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Boise, ID. 34pp.
- Paige, C. and S.A. Ritter. 1999. Birds in a sagebrush sea: managing sagebrush habitats for bird communities. Partners in Flight Western Working Group, Boise, ID. 46pp.