

DOE, Stoller Work to Understand Environment at INL Site

The U.S. Department of Energy is responsible for understanding and estimating future impacts from our mission at the INL Site. To accomplish this we must have adequate knowledge of the plants and animals on the Site. DOE also has an obligation to be a good neighbor to the people and businesses that may be affected by our presence in Eastern Idaho.

Elk became resident on the site in the 1980s. Since that time, there have been claims of elk depredation resulting from the “INL herd,” hence the depredation hunt on the north end. It is assumed the INL elk move into the agricultural fields around the site to feed on crops. The attached link, provided by Stoller, provides details on a study that will provide knowledge about the extent of that depredation and whether the controlled hunts actually help to mitigate the damage. These data will enable Idaho Fish and Game to alter their hunts or locations to minimize the impact to local agriculture, and in turn minimize the perception that the INL site is harboring these animals. Not much is known about the elk population on the INL Site other than the biannual counts conducted by Stoller, which provide information on seasonal trends but show nothing of their resource use or habitat needs on the desert. We have received comments on our NEPA documents from stakeholders expressing concerns about elk on the INL Site and the impact potential loss or fragmentation of habitat could have on elk. We have also been unable to answer questions about potential elk calving grounds on the INL Site and whether site operations are impacting those areas.



Researcher collars an elk on the INL

The data we collect during this study will also be included in the conservation management plan that is being developed to enable DOE to continue its mission on the site with minimal interruption resulting from sensitive species issues (sage-grouse, pygmy rabbit). While elk themselves are not a potential threatened or endangered species, they are good indicators of overall ecosystem health and data on these animals will contribute to the analysis of critical habitat for sensitive species on the INL Site.