History of the INL Site

The geological events that have shaped the modern Snake River Plain took place during the last 2 million years (Lindholm 1996; ESRF 1996). This plain, which arcs across southern Idaho to Yellowstone National Park, marks the passage of the earth's crust over a plume of melted mantle material.

The volcanic history of the Yellowstone-Snake River Plain volcanic field is based on the time-progressive volcanic origin of the region, characterized by several large calderas in the eastern Snake River Plain, with dimensions similar to those of Yellowstone's three giant Pleistocene calderas. These volcanic centers are located within the topographic depression that encompasses the Snake River drainage. Over the last 16 million years, a series of giant, caldera-forming eruptions occurred, with the most recent occurring at Yellowstone National Park over 630,000 years ago. The youngest silicic volcanic centers correspond to the volcanic field that is less than 2 million years old, and these centers are followed by a sequence of silicic centers that occurred about 6 million years ago southwest of Yellowstone National Park. A third group of centers, which occurred approximately 10 million years ago, is centered near Pocatello, Idaho. The oldest-mapped silicic rocks of the Snake River Plain are approximately 16 million years old and are distributed across a 150-km-wide (93-mi-wide) zone from southwestern Idaho to northern Nevada; combined, they are the suspected origin of the Yellowstone-Snake River Plain (Smith and Siegel 2000).

The earliest human occupants of the eastern Snake River Plain were the Shoshone and Bannock people, the ancestors of the present-day Shoshone-Bannock Tribes. Their presence dates back 13,000 years. Tools recovered from this period indicate these occupants were hunters of large game. Plants, animals, geological features, water, and other resources on the INL Site were important to the Shoshone and Bannock people and continue to hold significance to the present-day Shoshone-Bannock Tribes.

People of European descent began exploring the Snake River Plain between 1810 and 1840; these explorers were trappers and fur traders seeking new supplies of beaver pelts.

Between 1840 and 1857, an estimated 240,000 immigrants passed through southern Idaho on the Oregon Trail. The Shoshone and Bannock people entered into peace treaties in 1863 and 1868, which are known collectively today as the Fort Bridger Treaty. The Fort Hall Reservation was reserved for the various tribes under the treaty agreement. During the 1870s, miners entered the surrounding mountain ranges, followed by ranchers grazing cattle and sheep in the valleys.

In 1901, a railroad was opened between Blackfoot and Arco, Idaho. By this time, a series of acts (e.g., the Homestead Act of 1862, the Desert Claim Act of 1877, the Carey Act of 1894, the Reclamation Act of 1902) provided sufficient incentive for homesteaders to build diversionary canals to claim the desert. Most of these efforts failed due to the extreme porosity of the gravelly soils and underlying basalts.

During World War II, large guns from U.S. Navy warships were retooled at the U.S. Naval Ordnance Plant in Pocatello, Idaho. These guns needed to be tested, and the nearby uninhabited plain was used as a gunnery range, known then as the Arco Naval Proving Grounds. The U.S. Army Air Corps also trained bomber crews out of the Pocatello Airbase and used the area as a bombing range.

After the war ended, the nation turned to peaceful uses of atomic power. DOE's predecessor, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), needed an isolated location with an ample groundwater supply on which to build and test nuclear power reactors. In 1949, the Arco Naval Proving Grounds became the National Reactor Testing Station. To learn more about the history of the INL Site.

In 1951, the Experimental Breeder Reactor-I (EBR-I) became the first reactor to produce useful electricity. In 1955, the Boiling-Water Reactor Experiments-III reactor provided electricity to Arco, Idaho, which was the first time a nuclear reactor powered an entire community in the U.S. The laboratory also developed prototype nuclear propulsion plants for U.S. Navy submarines and aircraft carriers. Over time, the INL Site evolved into an assembly of 52 reactors, associated research centers, and waste handling areas.

History of the INL Site

The National Reactor Testing Station was renamed the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory in 1974 and was changed again to the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory (INEEL) in 1997 to reflect the Site's leadership role in environmental management. The AEC was renamed the U.S. Energy Research and Development Administration in 1975 and reorganized to the present-day DOE in 1977.

With renewed interest in nuclear power, DOE announced in 2003 that Argonne National Laboratory-West (ANL-W) and INEEL would be the lead laboratories in developing the next generation of nuclear reactors. On February 1, 2005, Battelle Energy Alliance, LLC (BEA), took over operation of the laboratory and merged INEEL with ANL-W. The facility name then was changed to the Idaho National Laboratory (INL). At this time, the INL Site's cleanup activities were moved to a separate contract, the Idaho Cleanup Project (ICP), which is currently managed by the Idaho Environmental Coalition, LLC (IEC). Research activities, which include projects other than nuclear research such as National and Homeland Security (NHS) projects, were consolidated in the newly named INL.