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Faster than light, Idaho gets connected

By Zach Hagadone

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When Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter threw the switch on the Idaho Regional Optical Network (IRON) Oct. 9, the state got its own "on ramp" to the ultra high-speed National Lambda Rail network – a nationwide fiber optic computer network that links the country's research community.

Idaho's connection – called a Gigapop – will enable the state's researchers, educators, health care institutions and government agencies access to a vast array of resources for collaboration and innovation, and provide the foundation for a future statewide system.

"IRON will offer Idaho a connection to the world's fastest super computers," said Brent Stacey, president of IRON and information technology director for the Idaho National Laboratory. "The Idaho National Laboratory is one of the premier research institutions in the nation, and we're going to need access to those super computers and we're going to need the bandwidth to exchange the data sets with those super computers."

Beyond that, Stacey said, IRON offers Idaho's universities access to a powerful research and outreach tool; it will give Idaho hospitals the ability to exchange and disseminate health data, extending their reach to rural, underserved areas; and it will give Idaho state government an ultra fast communications backbone that can streamline and improve the way it operates.

"It takes us from a dusty, slow-speed, rutted dirt road to a smooth, beautiful highway, and that's something we've uniquely lacked in

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Idaho," said Idaho National Laboratory spokesman Lou Riepl.

"This is not the traditional business level of bandwidth," Stacey said. "Typically it's about 1,200 times faster than the speed required by a traditional Idaho business. To put that in perspective, some very common analogies would be you could download three full-length CDs in under three seconds, or the Library of Congress could be downloaded in 14 minutes."

"It's probably one of the more remarkable grassroots collaborations across the state that I've ever seen," he added.

Spearheaded by the INL about two years ago, IRON is a non-profit organization composed of representatives from Boise State University, the University of Idaho, Idaho State University, Brigham Young University – Idaho, the Idaho Hospital Association, Washington State University and the State of Idaho.

"The concept of having broadband connectivity across the nation has been a strategy for a long time and INL took the leadership role of putting it together in Idaho," said Mike Gwartney, director of the Idaho Department of Administration and a member of IRON's board.

"It eventually will encompass the nation, but it certainly takes in our sister states," he said.

Washington, Oregon, Montana and Utah either already have similar networks or are preparing to bring them online, Gwartney said. IRON should be connected with those regional networks within the year, after certain contracts are in order, and once fully integrated, it will also offer Idaho business a significant advantage.

"Having access to that high speed connectivity is a recruiting tool for high-tech businesses to move into the area," Stacey said. "They look for three things: inexpensive power, access to labor and high bandwidth."