BOISE, Idaho – Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Bureau of Land Management Director Bob Abbey today joined Idaho Congressman Mike Simpson at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) to discuss federal firefighting assistance to Texas, where several large wildfires are burning; safety and preparedness for the current fire season; and a national strategy to address the mounting risks of wildfire around the nation.

“Though the last two fire seasons saw fewer wildfires than typical, the 2011 season has started early in Texas and could pose major challenges in the Southern, Southwest and Rocky Mountain areas due to dry weather and fuel conditions,” Secretary Salazar said. “Public and firefighter safety is always the top priority in managing wildland fires and adequate training and timely mobilization of personnel and equipment are vitally important.”

“I am pleased that Secretary Salazar and Director Abbey chose to come to Idaho and see firsthand how the National Interagency Fire Center plays a critical role in fighting our nation’s wildland fires. The men and women who put their lives in harm’s way depend on the sophisticated coordination that NIFC provides,” said Representative Simpson, who is chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and the Environment.

Wind-driven wildfires burning across central and west Texas have caused the deaths of two volunteer firefighters, destroyed about 400 homes and scorched more than a million acres. NIFC, the nation’s support center for wildland firefighting, is coordinating interagency assistance to the state, dispatching to date about 1,400 firefighters, 700 support staffers, 117 fire engines, 32 dozers, 26 helicopters, 15 fixed wing aircraft and two airtankers. Salazar, Abbey and Simpson expressed their condolences to the families of the Texas wildfire victims.

Salazar also met with NIFC fire directors to discuss the 2011 western fire season outlook, which shows the potential for active burning conditions if several weather factors align. Hot weather, dry fuel accumulations and widespread dry lighting, accompanied by steady winds, could create a challenging fire season in some regions. Nationally, wildfires have burned about 2.2 million acres in 2011 -- double the 10-year national average for this time of year.
Federal firefighting agencies are ready to vigorously respond to this year’s wildfires, coordinating their efforts through NIFC. Federal fire resources are estimated to include about 14,000 firefighters; 750 fire engines; more than 200 helicopters; about 70 single-engine airtankers; and up to 19 heavy airtankers.

Salazar, Abbey and Simpson also discussed the progress of a Cohesive Wildfire Management Strategy to address the increasing risks of wildland fire and to ensure community safety and the restoration of ecosystems for all Americans.

“The challenges of wildland fire are growing with millions of acres across the country at risk due to overcrowded stands of trees, insect infestations, and invasions of non-native species,” BLM Director Abbey said. “A century of fire exclusion, the advent of climate change and the growth of the urban-wilderness interface have led to this critical situation, calling for a coordinated national strategy among all stakeholders.”

Developed by the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, an intergovernmental body of federal, state, tribal and municipal representatives, the strategy focuses on restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes; creating fire-adapted communities; and responding to wildfire. This collaborative approach would leverage the assets and expertise of partners to get more done on the ground and require an all-hands approach across boundaries and jurisdictions.

In the morning, Secretary Salazar also met with Idaho Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter to explore how the Department of the Interior and Idaho can work together to advance the goals of President Obama’s America’s Great Outdoors initiative to support local conservation and recreation efforts.

The meeting was one of a series that Salazar is holding with the nation’s governors to discuss potential partnerships in their states, ranging from revitalizing urban parks to restoring rivers to using conservation easements in rural areas to conserve wildlife habitat while allowing ranching and farming to continue.

As part of their visit, Salazar, Simpson and Abbey also joined a smokejumpers’ training flight to observe these highly skilled firefighters in action.

NIFC, located in Boise, coordinates the firefighting resources and efforts of several different agencies and organizations: Interior’s Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Fish and Wildlife Service and National Business Center Aviation Management; the Department of Agriculture’s US Forest Service; NOAA’s National Weather Service; the National Association of State Foresters; and the U.S. Fire Administration.

For more information about the 2011 fire season, fire safety, and tips for homeowners, please visit www.nifc.gov.