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Rock Climbing Lured Engineer to the West, Cleanup Project Keeps Him Here

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho – After earning engineering degrees from Cornell University, Christopher Graham left the east coast for the Rocky Mountains to advance his interest in rock climbing. He got a job in Spokane, Washington, and climbed on the weekends.

Later, Graham's girlfriend was hired by an Idaho Falls engineering firm, and Graham moved with her. He got a job and worked as a subcontract engineer to Department of Energy Office of Environmental Management contractor Fluor Idaho at the Idaho National Laboratory (INL) Site.

"As soon as I had a job opening, I knew I had to hire Chris," Fluor Idaho Calcine Retrieval Project Manager Howard Forsythe said. "He did such a great job for us as a subcontractor."

Graham continued rock climbing in Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming, spending many weekends in an area called the Fins in the mountains bordering the INL Site. One day, however, he badly shattered his ankle, which significantly damped his passion for rock climbing.

During his three years on the Calcine Retrieval Project, Graham, 29, has designed and demonstrated several technologies that will be used to retrieve and transfer 220 cubic meters of a granulated, high-level waste called calcine remaining from the Idaho Nuclear Technology and Engineering Center's spent nuclear fuel reprocessing mission. The calcine will be transferred from one storage bin set to another, after which, the bin set will be closed under federal regulations.

Graham's work includes design and development of a wall-climbing robot capable of carrying heavy loads and operating in a high-radiation environment. He also conceived a strategy and designed much of the necessary equipment for remotely installing access riser pipes onto the calcine bin sets, helped develop a robotic articulating arm, and has been closely involved with the design of many other systems crucial to calcine retrieval.

Graham said it is that type of work that keeps him interested in working for EM.

"It's fairly rare to find a project with this much opportunity to develop things from scratch," he said. "We've had a lot of freedom to do the things that we think are necessary for the project."

Forsythe said Graham has thrived in that environment.

"His work so far has displayed creativity and initiative, and we anticipate that he will continue to be a valuable asset for our project for quite some time," he said.

Since joining the Calcine Retrieval Project, Graham has been promoted to a supervisory position. He is the technical lead for the design team, which still allows him to do what he loves — develop and test innovative technologies.

The Calcine Retrieval Project is a crucial project for the Idaho Cleanup Project. All 4,400 cubic meters of calcine must be retrieved from six bin sets and ready to leave the state by 2035 in compliance with the 1995 Idaho Settlement Agreement.

Despite his diminished interest in climbing, Graham moved to Pocatello to be near miles of mountain biking and hiking trails near his home.

It's just the kind of scenery and solitude a young engineer needs to keep his creative mind active.

Fluor Idaho, LLC is a wholly owned subsidiary of Fluor Corporation with subcontractor partners CH2M, North Wind Inc., Portage, and Waste Control Specialists. Fluor Idaho manages the Idaho Cleanup Project Core contract at the Department of Energy's Idaho National Laboratory Site located 45 miles west of Idaho Falls. The 5-year, \$1.4 billion project, funded through the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management, focuses on safely remediating the Idaho National Laboratory site including dispositioning transuranic waste, managing spent nuclear fuel, and treating high-level radioactive waste.

For more information, visit the Idaho Cleanup Project on the Web at <https://fluor-idaho.com>

Suggested Caption

Christopher Graham, calcine retrieval project lead design engineer for Department of Energy Office of Environmental Management contractor Fluor Idaho, adjusts settings on an access riser positioning system, which is used to hold a length of pipe in place for welding on top of a bin set. The riser will be used to insert equipment into the bin set for calcine retrieval at the Idaho National Laboratory Site.