

Tourism industry says county ready for more visitors

By Jennifer Davies
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It's been quite a trip for Murray MacLeod.

The Hewlett-Packard engineer, based in Ireland, checked into the Rancho Bernardo Inn late Sunday night – and was evacuated just a few hours later.

The company was able to find a room for MacLeod and co-worker Ray Williams at a Holiday Inn in La Jolla as wildfires moved through Rancho Bernardo.

But now the two are cutting their stay short, leaving today instead of Sunday.

“There are probably more deserving people than us,” MacLeod said. Williams agreed, saying, “Hotel rooms are like gold dust right now.”

With more business travelers checking out early, more prized vacant hotel rooms are beginning to materialize for fire evacuees.

Michael Hall, president of San Diego Concierge, which has been helping find rooms for evacuees, said the hotel situation was improving yesterday afternoon as some would-be San Diego visitors were canceling visits.

“Things were looking pretty bleak, but rooms are beginning to open up,” he said.

A large group postponed its meeting at the Manchester Grand Hyatt, and small pockets of rooms were opening up at such hotels as the San Diego Marriott Hotel and Marina.

Although more rooms are becoming available, there is no way to accommodate everyone who needs one, said Sal Giametta, spokesman for the San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau.

“There's 54,000 rooms and more than 250,000 evacuees. The math doesn't quite work,” he said.

Despite the tight hotel situation, tourism officials have tried to stress that San Diego is ready for visitors. The San Diego Convention Center Corp. sent an e-mail to meeting planners saying the facility was not threatened or impacted by the fires.

The American Society of Human Genetics began its annual meeting as scheduled yesterday at the Convention Center and was expected to attract about 6,000.

The influx of guests put some hotels in a jam as they tried to juggle the needs of evacuees with those of guests who had booked rooms months in advance.

Patsy Boch, director of sales and marketing at the Omni Hotel in downtown San Diego, said evacuees who checked in Monday knew they could only stay one night. Boch said the staff has worked hard to find accommodations at other locations.

“People were so appreciative,” she said. “They came up to me in the lobby to hug me.”

Brandon Blakely, who came from St. Louis for the convention, said he never considered canceling the trip because the meeting planners said there would be no issues. As the genetics society suggested, he decided to share a room with some friends so there would be more rooms available for those displaced by fires.

Blakely said everything seemed to be fine downtown.

“I haven't noticed the air quality,” said the 35-year-old sales rep. “I'm from St. Louis. “It's bad all the time.”

Steven Johnson, spokesman for the San Diego Convention Center, said the scene downtown is far different than when the 2003 Cedar fire turned downtown skies black and soot swirled in the air.

“The downtown is still open for business,” he said.

The convention and visitors bureau is also trying to get the message out that the region was still a viable vacation spot.

ConVis spokesman Giametta said the organization was working with the National Football League to arrange to broadcast video during Sunday's scheduled Chargers game that shows parts of San Diego that are unaffected by the fires. He said ConVis was able to get similar video aired on the Chargers broadcast during the 2003 firestorm.

Giametta said it was important to give tourists accurate information.

“While this is a very tragic situation, much of the visitor-related industry areas have not been affected,” he said.

Many hoteliers expect leisure travelers to cancel in the coming weeks. They expect tourists will come back once the flames are out and the ashes have settled.

“We are going to shake it off,” said Michael Murphy, director of room operations for the San Diego Marriott Hotel and Marina. “And we're going to have some beautiful sunsets.”

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