

San Diego “Open for Business”

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While wildfires raged around San Diego last week, the San Diego Convention Center remained—and remains—“open for business,” according to Steve Johnson, vice president of public affairs for the San Diego Convention Center Corp.

As this week began, firefighters in Southern California were close to bringing a series of devastating wildfires under control—fires that caused more than \$1 billion in damage, destroyed more than 2,000 homes, and forced the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of residents.

In San Diego, the fires resulted in the cancellation of one major convention. Sharp Healthcare had planned to hold its annual meeting for 12,000 to 14,000 local employees last week but canceled when it became clear that many of those employees were needed for fire-related medical emergencies.

But other meetings proceeded with few, if any, hitches. The American Society of Human Genetics, with close to 5,000 attendees, went ahead with its convention and saw very little attrition, according to Jane Nelson, a spokeswoman for the ASHG. “A few scientists who were local and were presenting at the meeting needed to cancel because they were evacuated from their homes,” said Nelson. “But, other than that, I don’t believe we were affected at all by cancellations.”

Instead, according to Nelson and San Diego hospitality officials, the ASHG did its part to help the city last week. Attendees volunteered to provide medical assistance to evacuees, doubled up in hotel rooms to free up space for evacuees, and started a fund to help with local relief efforts.

“We have been deeply touched and appreciative of the incredible efforts made by ASHG attendees, exhibitors, as well as ASHG meeting organizers who have gone above and beyond in their efforts to support the relief efforts currently under way in San Diego,” said Carol Wallace, president and CEO of the San Diego Convention Center Corp.

According to Johnson, with convention center employees having a tough time making it into work last week, staffing levels were a concern for several days. “But it’s not like we haven’t experienced this before,” said Johnson, referring to wildfires that broke out in 2003 and killed 14 people and destroyed more than 2,000 homes.

This week, several more groups are convening in San Diego, including the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials with about 2,000 attendees.

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