



Biogen Idec: An Oasis for Employees During the Southern California Wildfires

With wildfires threatening Southern California families and their homes, Biogen Idec opened its campus facilities to ease the burden of their employees who were in the fires' path of destruction. **By Candice J. Bruce, PhD**

The wildfires that ravaged southern California in late October 2007 halted business-as-usual at many of the over 500 biotech companies in San Diego County. The fires moved in on Sunday, October 21 and by Monday morning there were eight fires fueled by strong Santa Ana winds that derailed firefighters' efforts to stop them. Biotech centers in Carmel Valley, Sorrento Valley, and Carlsbad as well as their adjacent neighborhoods, which house many of the 36,000 people employed in the San Diego biotech industry, were in jeopardy.

Several biotech companies and academic institutions were closed due to the looming threat of the approaching wildfires. Recognizing the seriousness of the situation and that many of their employees would be affected by the fires, Biogen Idec's San Diego facility opened up its campus to displaced employees without hesitation. Over 30 percent of Biogen Idec's employees had been evacuated and many of them along with their families and pets spent the night at the campus hoping their home would be spared. To try and make everyone as comfortable as possible, "the catering staff stayed on and prepared meals; blankets and pillows were provided as well as books and

DVDs for the kids," said Naomi Aoki, director of corporate communications for Biogen Idec.

Jorg Thommes, director of purification process development at Biogen Idec, evacuated his home during the wildfires; he and his family spent the night at the campus. His children were frightened by the fires, but "when we arrived at Biogen Idec they saw some of their friends and became happier so my wife and I became more comfortable. We were deeply impressed with the company's commitment and concern for us. A few days after we returned home, my daughter asked when the next sleepover at daddy's work would be."

Over 300,000 people in San Diego County had been forced to flee their homes. Biogen Idec kept its campus open for the displaced employees and was able to secure hotel rooms for many of them. Concern for the welfare of the evacuees led to a group being formed to make sure that employees were aware of resources available to help them, and many employees not affected by the fires opened up their homes to those that needed a place to stay. Annie Glidden, head of the relief effort at Biogen Idec, stated, "I was amazed by the unquestioning com-

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mitment for employee safety and well-being coming from everyone at Biogen Idec in San Diego as well as our other locations. Everyone came together on behalf of the people affected by the fires, and it was something that I had not experienced before at a company.” Biogen Idec was closed for business the entire week of October 22 and employees were paid in full.

Overall the wildfires burned more than 300 square miles and destroyed over 1000 homes in San Diego. The economic impact is estimated to be over \$1 billion in San Diego County alone. Numerous biotech companies including Genentech, Invitrogen, Althea Technologies, and Biogen Idec as well as others have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to various fire relief funds. Biogen Idec has donated \$50,000 to Habitat for Humanity as well as other funds and is organizing a team to work with the organization to rebuild a home.