

Facility Manager Project Profile

Billy To

FUEL TO THE FIRE

How a Panda Express restaurant facility manager handled a nearby fuel truck explosion

With Billy To, CRFP

What is your title at Panda Restaurant Group? Senior Facilities Manager.

How many locations does Panda operate? About 2,000.

How many locations are you responsible for? I'm responsible for more than 66 locations. My facilities management team manages a total of 200 restaurants.

Briefly describe the fuel truck explosion near the Atwater, Calif., location. On March 23, 2017, a tanker truck hauling more than 8,000 gallons of fuel was en route to an AM/PM gas station in Atwater at the 99 Freeway off-ramp near Glendale Boulevard. Highway patrol investigators believe the truck was going too fast while exiting the highway, which caused it to hit a concrete divider. The truck tipped over, causing an explosion.

One of our Panda locations was among the closest buildings to the fire. The highway was closed down in both directions. Nearby residents were evacuated, and you could see smoke from miles away. The highway was reopened the following day, but it took several days to clean up the off-ramp before it was re-opened.

How were you made aware of the accident? A colleague from Florida texted me, asking if this was my store.

What was the initial action of the store's employees and customers? It was surreal, and they didn't believe what they were seeing; however, once they realized what had happened, both associates and guests immediately evacuated and headed to the south side of the building, away from the danger area.

What was your initial response? I called the store to understand what needed to be done from their perspective. I cancelled everything that had been scheduled for that day and the next few days so I could drive to the store and assess the damage.

What contractors did you call to secure the facility and perform the necessary repairs? A local handyman and plumber.

How soon were you able to get to the restaurant? The very next morning.

With the area isolated, were you able to gain access to the store? I was able to gain access to the store and the explosion area; however, the exit ramp was closed and it remained closed for several days for an investigation and repairs.

What was damaged at the restaurant? The following had melted from the high heat of the fire: patio furniture, large patio umbrellas, the front of the store awning, a high monument sign, the front part of the roof and the front section of the landscape, including the irrigation system.

Were all the utilities shut off by the time you arrived? Yes. All services (gas, electric and water) were turned off for two days due to the severity of the damage.

How long was the store closed? We were closed on the day of the tanker truck explosion and reopened on the third day, due in part to my plumber's quick action to replace the three exterior backflow devices that were melted by the heat of the fire.

What was the estimated cost of repairs? Approximately \$30,000 to \$35,000.

Were adjacent establishments damaged? Yes. While we were closest to the tanker truck, the adjacent establishment also experienced extensive damage.

What did you learn? What could potentially be done differently in the future? The lesson is anything is possible. Our staff, management and company responded quickly to ensure our associates and guests were safe and away from harm. Also, the partnership with operations and our vendor team played a key role in the success of getting our store back up and operational on the third day after the tanker truck explosion.

Billy To, CRFP, is a Senior Facilities Manager at Panda Restaurant Group Inc. and has worked in this field for more than seven years.