

New blaze ignites near LA as fierce California wildfires rage

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Firefighters battle flames on a hillside near homes in Santa Paula, California, as the Los Angeles region grapples with wind-whipped wildfires

An inferno engulfed the Los Angeles region Wednesday, forcing more than 200,000 people to evacuate and threatening thousands of homes, including the luxe Bel-Air neighborhood dotted with mansions.

The flames have swallowed some 80,000 acres (32,000 hectares) in just

over a day since the "Thomas" fire, currently the state's largest, broke out, leaving at least one dead in an area about 45 minutes from downtown LA.

High winds caused another wave of wildfires to erupt overnight, including one in Los Angeles' affluent Bel-Air neighborhood. The area battled gridlocked heavy traffic as ash and smoke churned over the smoldering hillside.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti said more than 230,000 people had evacuated Los Angeles and Ventura counties.

"Very strong winds" blowing from the northeast to the southwest were causing the fire to balloon, he said, warning Angelenos to be ready to evacuate at a moment's notice.

"These are days that break your heart but also days that shows the resilience of our city," he said.

The "Skirball" fire ignited before 5 am (1300 GMT) and quickly grew to engulf some 150 acres, with forecasters predicting that 25 mile-per-hour (40 kilometer-per-hour) winds could cause further spreading, threatening multi-million dollar homes and the acclaimed Getty Center museum.



Firefighters work to save burning houses in the Skirball Fire near Los Angeles

The Skirball fire—near a cultural center of the same name and captured in apocalyptic images—also prompted authorities to close the 405 Freeway, a major commuting corridor famous for its traffic congestion.

A cloud of black smoke was creeping across the city with a large, dark column rising into the air, leaving authorities concerned about the poor quality of air that was unbreathable in some places.

Flames menacing art

The acclaimed Getty arts institution—home to masterpieces including "The Spring" by Edouard Manet—was closed until at least Thursday, with museum authorities tweeting that "air filtration systems are protecting the galleries from smoke."

Television footage showed the Bel-Air neighborhood home to celebrities and billionaires, where both entrepreneur Elon Musk and pop superstar Beyonce own property.

In 1961, a fire consumed 500 homes in the hillside district.

Dozens of schools were closed Wednesday, as was Santa Monica College.



A woman involved in a traffic accident waits to get towed beside a wall of flames on the 101 highway during the Thomas wildfire near Ventura, California

Just north in Ventura County the Thomas blaze continued unabated, after erupting in the hills of oak and scrub north of Santa Paula, powered

by strong seasonal gusts known as Santa Ana winds.

The area was clogged with thick black smoke, forcing mandatory evacuations, road closures and school cancellations.

Fire departments from across the state had arrived to help battle the ferocious wildfires, as heavy winds expected to continue through Thursday complicated their struggle to contain the flames.

The National Weather Service predicted "extremely critical fire weather," saying wind gusts could hit 70 miles per hour in some areas.

Authorities warned that winds will likely remain strong until Friday.

State of emergency

Firefighters were also on the scene of the Rye fire—which had grown to 7,000 acres in the Santa Clarita area—as well as the Creek fire north of downtown Los Angeles that had grown to more than 11,000 acres.



A helicopter drops water on the Skirball Fire in west Los Angeles, California

California Governor Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency over the area Tuesday, announcing: "This fire is very dangerous and spreading rapidly.

"It's critical residents stay ready and evacuate immediately if told to do so."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said it had released funds for relief services.

US President Donald Trump tweeted a message of "thoughts and prayers" to California as it nears the end of its deadliest year ever for wildfires.

"I encourage everyone to heed the advice and orders of local and state officials," the president said on Twitter. "THANK YOU to all First Responders for your incredible work!"

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