

Wildfires scorch homes of the rich and famous in Los Angeles

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The luxurious multi-million homes in Bel-Air are threatened by the Skirball Fire, a blaze that destroyed 200 hectares (500 acres) in less than 24 hours

Replica Tuscan castles, minimalist mansions and country cottages in the rarefied Bel-Air neighborhood of Los Angeles could soon be reduced to ashes, their owners' fame and wealth providing little immunity against California's latest raging wildfires.

"We're evacuating the street you must leave!" a police officer barked into a bullhorn, amid the din of helicopters and airplanes dropping [fire retardants](#).

"The fire is at the end of this street," added one of his colleagues.

The officer knocks on each door on the street—home to the likes of SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, pop superstar Beyonce and media magnate Rupert Murdoch—to make sure no one is left behind.

The luxurious multi-million homes here are threatened by the fire named "Skirball", a blaze that destroyed 200 hectares (500 acres) in less than 24 hours.

At least four homes were already reduced to ashes, while Murdoch's property, along with his vineyard, was surrounded by flames.

Evan Klein, a photographer in jeans and a white t-shirt, locked his door taking only his cameras and his dog, who waited for him on the passenger seat of his vintage sedan. His wife was already at work.

"We woke up at 5:30 (Wednesday) morning and the fire was on the hill and was coming right towards us," he told AFP.

"It was pitch black out and you were seeing orange on that hill, and it became enormous at the end of the street," he said.

He hoped that the fire would remain contained—even as authorities said the wind was expected to dramatically pick up as Thursday progressed.

Like a car on the highway

Sheldon Shire had just turned the ignition on his car and was getting

ready to head over to his son's house. He and his wife Joni were nervous.



A helicopter drops water over the Moraga Estate, the only working winery in Bel-Air and home to Rupert Murdoch in Bel Air

They are taking "papers, valuables, works of art, letters from our grandchildren, photos of our weddings, passports, computer passwords," she said.

"It's hard to choose. All of a sudden everything has a lot of value," adds the brunette with a bob cut and round glasses.

Greater Los Angeles has been struck since Monday evening with several blazes like the Thomas Fire in Ventura County, about 45 minutes' drive from the city.

It has claimed one life and swallowed more than 80,000 acres and 150 buildings.

Local fire chief Captain Anthony Valdez said conditions were the worst he'd seen in 20 years "because of the low humidity and the wind—it was blowing at 50 miles per hour (80 kilometers per hour) with gusts up to 80 mp/h," he explained as branches and vegetation devoid of moisture popped noisily in the background.

The Rupert Murdoch estate, multiple opulent mansions and a vineyard surrounded by heavy gating, was threatened by several blazes.

By dawn, Skirball, which has already threatened the Getty Center museum and its collection of masterpieces, was "was coming to you as fast as a car on the highway" with flames higher than 10 meters, said Valdez.

As he and his team battled the blaze, they "took down the door of a house and hid there until the fire passed us," he added.

He gestured to two houses that have already been razed to the ground on the hills at the end of the adjoining Moraga Lane.

A firefighter for the past 30 years, Valdez had already spent nearly 48 hours on his feet, but this was far from his first rodeo.

"We do cat naps of 10 to 20 minutes," he added, preparing for a long night ahead.

The last Bel-Air fire in 1961 left 500 homes destroyed and prompted revision of the city's fire code.

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