

This Is Fine

First responders saw LA's latest fire as routine, but people watching on the internet saw a glimpse of the apocalypse.



The Skirball fire as seen from the 405 freeway

Joe Mendez

ALEXIS C. MADRIGAL

DEC 6, 2017 | TECHNOLOGY

Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to [The Atlantic Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

SIGN UP

In [video after video](#) posted to Twitter and Snapchat early this morning, the scene near Los Angeles was the same: a stream of cars moving through the Sepulveda Pass on the 405 driving right past seams of fire, walls of flame racing up and down hillsides. The comparisons were inevitable: Mordor. The famous “[This is fine](#)” dog.

And a question arose, too. Why are these people driving on this highway?

It seemed crazy. But for what became known as the Skirball fire, the emergency response worked pretty much as it should have, according to authorities at the California Highway Patrol, LA County Fire Department, and Cal Fire. The records of the incident generated by the highway patrol indicate that the response to the fire was routine.

The highway patrol worked in concert with the county's firefighters and Caltrans, which is responsible for the state's transportation network, to shut down the highway, which took some time, allowing many motorists to catch video of the fire.

"We always want to have the roadway open and free of danger," said Sergeant Saul Gomez of the California Highway Patrol. "In a case like Skirball, even if there is a fire on the right shoulder, we will leave the highway open until we deem it unsafe for the motoring public or responder personnel."

Shutting down the 405 is a serious change to make in the Los Angeles transportation system. The **northbound 405** can carry up to 11,700 cars per hour at peak times. People are trying to get to or from work, to pick up children, to keep the city functioning. It's not a decision that they want to make lightly. They entrust the officers on the scene to work with local fire officials to make the call on when shutting down lanes becomes necessary. They don't need to appeal to any higher authority.

The highway patrol received its first report of the fire at 4:51 a.m. By 5:03 a.m., the highway patrol requested that a "sigalert" be issued, which indicates a "traffic incident that will tie up two or more lanes of a freeway for two or more hours."

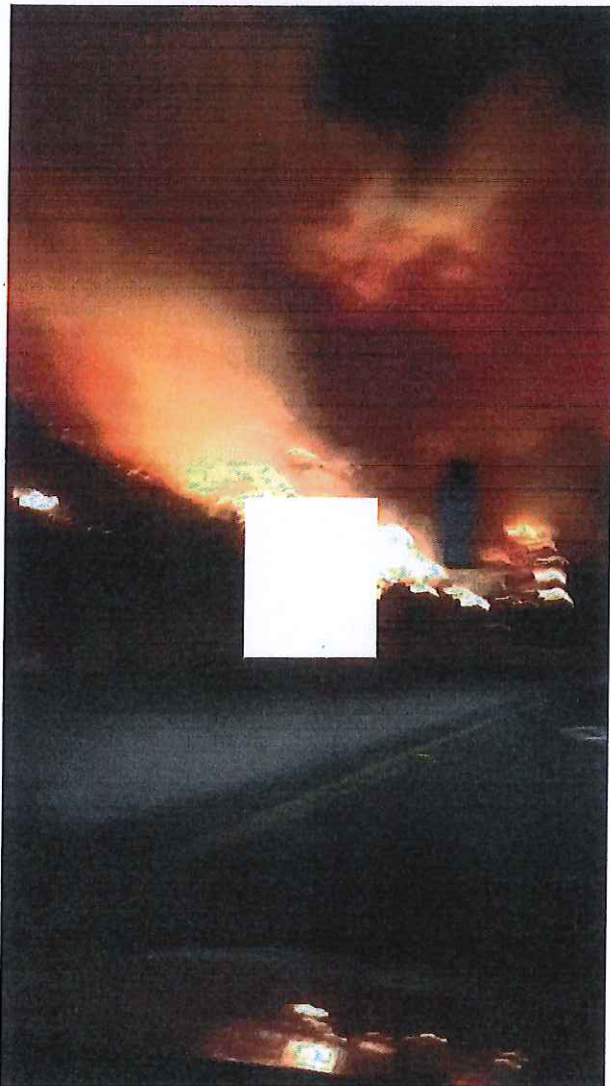
By 5:15 a.m., a highway-patrol unit sent the message "ENTIRE SEPULVEDA PASS IS ON FIRE—IT'S MOVING QUICK." Seven minutes later, the highway patrol asked for Caltrans's help with a "hard closure" of the highway.

But physically, it is impossible to instantly shut down a major highway. Officials from some authority have to be posted at every on-ramp and traffic has to be diverted. "To shut it down completely where it's sealed and you're safe to walk on the freeway takes about 30 minutes to an hour," said Gomez.

So, calls kept coming in from people on the freeway, who were driving through and (quite reasonably) scared. “[Reporting parties] are stopped on the freeway and are afraid the fire is going to come down onto the freeway and burn them,” reads one highway-patrol report from 10 minutes *after* the procedure for shutting the freeway had begun.

To bring lanes of traffic under control, patrol cars will “run breaks,” swerving across lanes of traffic to bring cars to a controlled stop. That began roughly at 5:52 a.m.

By 6:31 a.m., all the northbound lanes were closed, but Joe Mendez drove by going south and took in the following scene.



By that time, the Los Angeles Police Department had been pulled in to help with other closures. Eventually the southbound side was briefly closed as well. For a

short time, the legendarily busy freeway looked like this.

The empty 405 (Mario Tama / Getty Images)

By the 1 o'clock hour, the danger to the freeway had passed, and the lanes began to be reopened. Everyone that I talked to had seen the incident as just another day in the life of a city that's often ravaged by fires.



What's really changed, however, is the amount of video flowing out of scenes like this. Between Twitter and Snapchat's geo-located video feature, it's possible to see the raw experience of nearly anyone who is near the scene of a serious, but manageable, fire.

What would have been the breathlessly recounted story of the few becomes the vicariously lived experience of the many.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ALEXIS C. MADRIGAL is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. He's the author of *Powering the Dream: The History and Promise of Green Technology*.

 [Twitter](#)  [Email](#)