



The Fireworks-Wildfire Connection

As the July 4 holiday approaches, it's tempting to include fireworks in our celebrations, along with a backyard barbecue, the local parade, and our favorite patriotic music. But Independence Day arrives during wildfire season, when even a small spark or a discarded match used to light a sparkler can ignite a huge fire. Among the many wildfires caused in recent years by unsafe use of fireworks are these:

- The Black Rock Fire of 2003, ignited by fireworks, burned 2,050 acres near Pocatello, Idaho.
- A child playing with fireworks in Newberry Springs, California, started a fire in 2005 which burned about 70 acres. An elderly man died in the fire.
- In 2006, two teenaged boys set off fireworks in dry brush, starting a fire that burned 450 acres in San Bernardino County, California. The fire forced the evacuation of about 200 homes and put hundreds of people at risk.
- In San Jacinto, California, a 50-year old man was fined \$150,000 to cover the cost of fighting a 360-acre wildfire which started when he ignited illegal fireworks in his yard.

As might be expected, there are more wildfires during the summer, when grasses and foliage are dry. As development spreads into wildland areas, wildfires are increasingly started by humans rather than by natural events such as lightning.

Many Wildfires Start on the Fourth of July

One of the human causes of wildfires is use of fireworks. According to the National Fire Protection Association, use of fireworks causes more than 32,000 fires each year; about 12,000 of these are grass fires, and about 8,600 are brush fires. Fireworks are responsible for about 10,000 injuries each year, and sometimes people die (five deaths in 2003). Fires started by fireworks cause about \$20 million in property damage each year, and destroy thousands of acres of public and private lands, including valuable wildlife habitat.

NFPA figures indicate that more fires are reported on July 4 than on any other day of the year, and the United States Fire Administration reports that fireworks account for about half of all July 4 fires. Of all fireworks-related fires reported each year, about one third occur on Independence Day. And the incidence of brush fires and grass fires is nearly four times higher during the July 4th holiday than on the average day.

Across the country, federal, state, county, and municipal officials are restricting — and in some cases, banning — the sale and use of fireworks in an effort to prevent wildfires. Even simple sparklers (which burn at about 1800°F!) have been prohibited in many high-risk areas. Some fireworks manufacturers and distributors are supporting the bans by suspending sales and shipments in affected areas. Anyone wishing to use fireworks — both consumers and pyrotechnic professionals — should consult local officials to determine what is — and is not — permitted. Fireworks are not allowed in most national parks and forests.

In California and other areas, "safe and sane" fireworks are permitted during designated periods, usually around holidays when fireworks are traditionally used. "Safe and sane" fireworks are generally defined as fireworks that are not projected or shot through the air; that cannot project or shoot anything except showers of sparks; cannot move across the ground; and cannot explode. The possession, sale, storage, transport, and use of these items is usually subject to strict regulation, so be sure to find out what's legal in your area.

Plan for a Safe Celebration

Fire safety experts remind us that even under ideal conditions, and even when they are handled by experts, fireworks are inherently dangerous: they are designed to burn, explode, shoot, and send off sparks. During an unusually dry season such as most of the West is experiencing this year, *any* use of fireworks puts entire communities at risk for wildfire, with the inevitable loss of property, habitat, and even human life.

If you want to enjoy fireworks for the Fourth of July, attend a public display by a trained pyrotechnical professional. These events are conducted under controlled conditions and in compliance with regulations suitable for each locale.

If your town allows fireworks, and you choose to use them on your own, follow these important safety guidelines:

- First, find out what is permitted in your area. Buy only legal fireworks, and obtain any needed permits.
- Read instructions and warnings carefully. Purchase only fireworks that list ingredients and include instructions.
- Store fireworks properly.
- Never allow children or youth to handle or use fireworks. Supervise children carefully.
- Do not wear loose clothing that might catch on fire. Keep hair short or tied back out of the way.
- Use fireworks only on flat, firm surfaces, cleared of all combustible and flammable materials. Never set off fireworks near grassy or wooded areas, or near trash containers, or in or near vehicles or buildings.
- Keep a hose and bucket of water at hand. If you know how to use a fire extinguisher, obtain one and keep it handy.
- Never hold lighted fireworks in your hands. Keep away from fireworks that have been lit.
- If a device fails to go off, do not go near or bend over it to investigate. Douse it with water and dispose of it safely. Do not try to re-light it.
- Allow burned devices to cool completely, and then douse them before disposing of them properly. Never leave them on the ground, where they can smolder and start a fire.

For more information about how to manage your business risks, call Sequoia Loss Control at 831-657-4507