

[Modesto Bee Commentary Mon., July 2, 2012](#)

How about lasers red glare?

Like Francis Scott Key's Fort McHenry, the venerable tradition of Independence Day fireworks shows is under attack.

From one flank, red ink from municipal budgets has fireworks fuses fizzling. Without enough bucks for their bang, California cities that once bankrolled fireworks shows for the Fourth of July have canceled them – though in the immediate Sacramento region, most of the shows go on.

On another side, environmentalists are raising questions: What about the smoke? The noise? The debris?

One environmental group in San Diego has won three court decisions against the annual La Jolla fireworks next to two sensitive oceanfront areas, but the show will be held this year.

Fireworks face at least one other, "Star Wars"-like threat: lasers. Laser light shows are making inroads in places where fireworks have been nixed, including Monterey, which will use lights choreographed to live music this Wednesday.

The economy appears to have caused the most damage to the tradition. Monterey, for example, cut its \$200,000 fireworks show in 2009 while facing a multi-million-dollar budget deficit. This year, San Ramon in the Bay Area cut its show, too. Despite these cancellations and others, the American Pyrotechnics Association says municipal fireworks displays are alive and well.

There are 14,000 shows being done for Independence Day 2012 around the country, said Julie L. Heckman, executive director of the group.

She didn't challenge the idea that cities are cutting back, but said "what we're really seeing is a shift in who's paying for the fireworks."

Corporate and private donors are picking up the tab, she said.

In Monterey, the nonprofit Monterey Bay Symphony is paying for Fourth of July entertainment, but it's skipping the fireworks.

"This is going to be groundbreaking," said Michael Walas, who came up with the laser idea for the symphony group.

He estimates the laser show will cost about \$10,000 – a fraction of the fireworks show, which used to be shot off over the famous bay.

Eliminating pounding noise and debris on the coast is a good thing, Walas said. "Here we have the Monterey Bay which is a protected (marine) sanctuary," he said. "It can't be denied that there's residue going into the bay."

He hopes the city will be pleased by the alternative show and will take back the show – and its lowered costs – in future years.

Creative Laser Media, the Bay Area company doing the show, says laser displays for the Fourth have become more popular since the company did its first show 13 years ago.

Another place that opted for lasers is the tiny town of Columbus, Texas.

The town used to have fireworks, but one Fourth of July a wildfire broke out and forced cancellation of the pyrotechnics, said Kim Dyer of the Chamber of Commerce. (Boulder and Aspen in Colorado have also canceled this year due to fire danger.) Last year, Texas' devastating drought forced cancellation in Columbus again.

Faced with the prospect of paying cancellation fees again for fireworks, the chamber looked elsewhere.

"They can set a real nice laser show to patriotic music," Dyer said.

Laser shows also have been suggested where there are environmental concerns. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District offered \$10,000 grants to cities that switched to lasers after Hanford came to them with the idea.

Fireworks contribute to particulate-matter pollution.

Although particulates are more of a problem in winter, you can see a spike near big fireworks shows, said Lori Kobza, a spokeswoman for the Sacramento Air Quality Management District. But no one took the San Joaquin Valley district up on the offer this year.

Also uninterested in lasers is San Diego. Despite suits by the Coastal Environmental Rights Foundation, the city will do its annual show next to an area considered of special biological significance and another that's a sea lion rookery, said Livia Borak, a legal adviser to CERF.

"We also suggested laser shows," she said.

Despite winning in court, the group won't try blocking the show this year. "We're not trying to ruin everybody's holiday," Borak said.

"For sure, we're looking ahead to 2013. We're going to do everything we can." After all, she said, "there's nothing more patriotic than clean water."