

Commentary in the Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, June 22, 2016:

Any way you slice it, fireworks aren't worth the cost

By Lois Henry

I got a letter recently from Phantom Fireworks.

Well, it came to “editor,” not me personally. We're not like pen pals or anything.

Anyhow, it was a reminder that fireworks can trigger PTSD for combat veterans. Which, they can. It's serious and devastating.

The letter advised that people who want to shoot off fireworks should let their neighbors know so any combat vets can “take steps to avoid the unintended consequences.”

Then it gives this website: www.militarywithptsd.org for any veterans who might want a sign for their yard asking neighbors to please be considerate when blowing off fireworks near their homes.

I got two things from that letter:

- A) Phantom has ZERO idea what the Fourth of July is like around these parts.
- B) There is a substantial cost to fireworks that seems to be paid by everyone except those who use them.

AIR QUALITY

The San Joaquin Valley is already out of compliance for a little thing called PM2.5, tiny bits of soot and dust.

Even with a raft of regulations squeezing local businesses and families foregoing fires during winter, we're still nowhere near PM2.5 standards for what's considered healthy air.

Then along comes July 4th and our levels go through the roof.

Interestingly, the EPA gives the valley a pass for fireworks pollution so it doesn't count as an “exceedence” of air pollution standards.

I'm not sure how fireworks smoke is less unhealthy than smoke from my chimney on a cold night, but that's the government for you.

I wonder if folks with asthma and other lung diseases give fireworks smoke a “pass?”

ENFORCEMENT

People always want to know what it costs to have cops and firefighters running all over the city trying (and failing) to stamp out illegal fireworks.

According to 2015 numbers, the city had 91 people, firefighters and cops, assigned to its task force.

Cost for fire personnel was \$15,851, police \$3,615.

Over at the county, there were 38 people assigned to the task force.

I could only get the Sheriff's costs, which were \$6,697.

Together, city and county handled more than 1,900 fireworks calls.

And, yes, I know hundreds more went unanswered as residents were bombarded by illegal fireworks.

In any case, personnel costs are paid for by fireworks booth permit fees in the city (\$300 per booth) and fines from illegal fireworks citations (\$1,500 per citation) in the county.

I suppose one could argue that fireworks — legal or illegal — pay their own freight.

But, I'm not finished yet.

FIRES

The city battled 15 fireworks-related fires while the county worked 11.

Combined, the cost of those fires — including one that cost a family its house — was well over \$500,000.

When the county has a fireworks-related wildland fire, which it did in 2014, costs go into the stratosphere. Air tankers alone cost \$10,000 a drop, Kern County Fire Chief Brian Marshall told the Board of Supervisors earlier this month.

ANIMALS

The county shelter takes in about 100 more animals in the first two weeks of July than other months, the city shelter sees about 20 to 30 more animals.

Cost per animal at the county is \$229 and \$132 at the city.

So that's an extra \$27,000 we're spending to handle dozens of terrified animals.

INJURIES

Kimberly Hernandez a senior epidemiologist at the Kern County Public Health Department, clued me into this nifty database by the California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development that tracks all kinds of injuries and deaths by county.

I plugged in ER visits due to fireworks exposure (there's no distinction made between legal and illegal) and looked back to 2006.

The number of people hurt by fireworks hovers around a half dozen every year until 2014 when it jumps to 14, with two people having to be hospitalized.

We'll have to see if that's an anomaly.

And it could be that all those folks paid with private insurance. Or it could not be.

CHARITIES

I think it's pretty clear that no amount of permit fees from fireworks booths or fines from citations pay all the costs associated with fireworks.

So, now we're down to the argument of how much fireworks sales benefit charities.

I'm sure you've heard numbers of \$30,000 to \$40,000 tossed around. I have too.

But when you look at how much has to be paid in permit fees, paid back to the fireworks companies for booth materials, the fireworks themselves, etc., the actual net is more like \$8,000, according to the charities I've talked with.

That's good money, but it's not \$30,000.

And \$8,000 could probably be earned in other ways. Ways that don't bring so much havoc and harm to the community.

CONCLUSION

When you look at fireworks from a cost/benefit viewpoint, it's clear to me they aren't worth the cost by just about every measure.

So, yeah, I'm still for a total ban of personal fireworks (keep the professional shows).

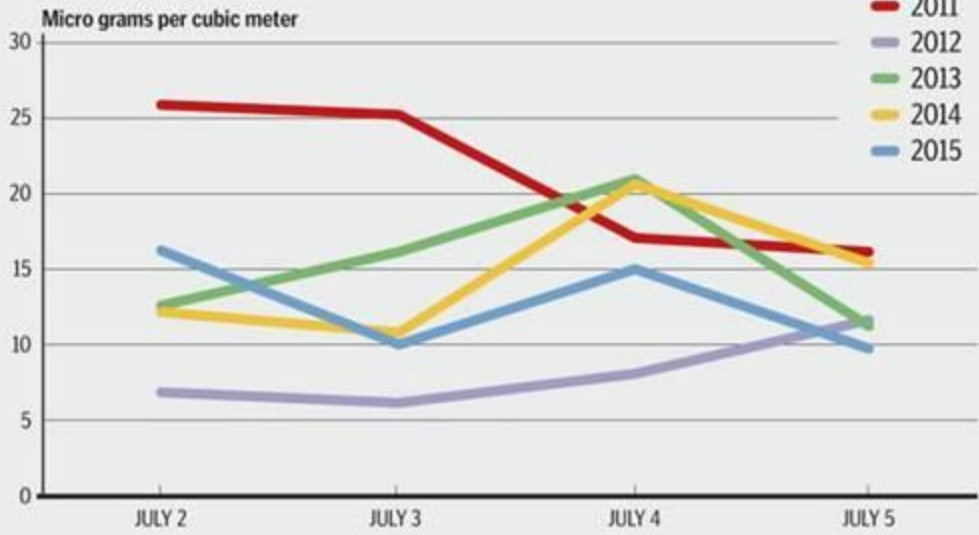
Don't care what I think?

How about the guy whose job it is to keep us all from burning up in the night?

"For me, it's easy. I'm against something that burns a person's house down," said Bakersfield Fire Chief Doug Greener. "It's got to be better than it is now (with a full ban)."

Kern County maximum PM2.5 levels

July 2 through July 5



Source: San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

THE CALIFORNIAN