

Fireworks can put a damper on Independence Day festivities

By Krysta Scriptor

Fresno Bee, Wednesday, June 29, 2016

Nothing says patriotism like fireworks bursting over a crowd-filled park on a July evening. For most Americans, going out to see fireworks on the Fourth of July is a time-honored tradition.

But smoke in the air and eye injury from fireworks can leave lasting damage. Sparks from fireworks can ignite brush fires. For some, hearing explosions over their heads is traumatic.

"We encourage you to be patriotic, be out with your family, put up your flag, but understand how dangerous fireworks are," said Heather Heinks, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Safety First

Heinks warned that tiny particulate matter left from exploding fireworks can be inhaled and then enter the bloodstream and that it easily bypasses the body's natural filter system. Material from exploded fireworks can cause wheezing, shortness of breath, watery eyes, dry throat and aggravate other respiratory conditions.

Particulate matter is defined as an airborne mixture of solid and liquid matter and can be composed of dust, smoke, dirt or soot. Heinks also warns that exposure to particulate matter is linked to heart attack, stroke and long-term respiratory conditions.

Smoke and particulate matter are more localized when backyard fireworks are used, so the effects are greater.

"You're essentially smoking out your neighbors," Heinks said.

Smoke isn't the only hazard. Fireworks-related injuries account for nearly 10,000 emergency visits every year, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission says.

"It can happen to anyone," said Dr. Philip Rizzuto, a spokesman for the American Academy of Ophthalmology. Rizzuto said he sees a lot of fireworks-related injuries, most coming from people using smaller, locally bought fireworks.

"The smaller ones are the ones people look at and think 'This one is small, this one isn't going to hurt me,'" he said. "I think there's a misconception of what is a firework. A firework can be something small like a sparkler or a popper."

Sparklers are still dangerous, he said. Kids often run around as they hold them, and those sparks can get into kids' eyes.

Fireworks-related injuries can range anywhere from minor cuts and burns to more serious eye injuries.

In one case, Rizzuto said, a man was hit in the eye with a fountain candle. He had thought the candle was extinguished and had come closer to look at it when it exploded. The man had to undergo several surgeries, including a corneal transplant.

Any time an eye injury occurs, Rizzuto said, vision can be seriously affected. In some cases, fireworks can cause blindness.

"Blind as in they can't see anything, blind as in the eye can be destroyed," he added.

Safe and sane

Legal fireworks look a lot like illegal fireworks, Fresno Fire Department said. In the wrong hands, they can be just as dangerous.

At a fire safety demonstration on Tuesday, the fire department showed how legal fireworks, marked with the state fire marshal logo, can start grass fires just as easily as illegal fireworks.

Fire officials also stressed the importance of lighting legal fireworks correctly. Putting fireworks on another surface, like a table or ladder, makes it illegal, and violators can be fined.

The Fire Department responded to more than 300 calls last Fourth of July, 66 of which were fire calls. Five were residential/work fires that caused substantial damage.

The Fire Department also warned about sparklers, noting that sparks can ignite grass or brush.

Rizzuto, Heinks and the Fire Department all recommend the same thing for staying safe this Fourth of July: See a professional show. Smoke and material from fireworks have more time to dissipate, and professionals know how far away guests need to be to be safe.

If you do plan on using smaller fireworks on the Fourth of July, there are some things you can do keep yourself safe.

Wear eye protection. Treat fireworks with respect, even if you think they're extinguished. Keep a 5-gallon bucket of water nearby, and soak used fireworks overnight before tossing them in a trash can.

Emotional effects

Fireworks can do more than physical harm. The unexpected sound of fireworks can remind combat veterans of gunfire and explosions, triggering post-traumatic stress disorder.

Military with PTSD, a nonprofit aimed at helping veterans and their families deal with the effects of PTSD, helps deliver informative yard signs to veterans who can be affected by loud fireworks. These signs ask neighbors not to quit fireworks entirely but to warn veterans beforehand in order to keep everyone as safe as possible.

The signs are given at no cost to the veterans, but the nonprofit accepts donations to help cover costs.

Last year, 12 veterans in Fresno and surrounding areas got the signs.

Fireworks alternatives

Safety and fire concerns have encouraged cities to think about other options for a fireworks show.

In 2012, the air district attempted to entice several counties to consider a safer, less smoky laser show with a grant to help cover the costs. The Hanford Sentinel reported that Hanford came close to replacing fireworks with lasers, but the costs to run an entertaining show would have been more than initially budgeted, even with the air district's grant.

Last year, wildfire concerns prompted Bass Lake to swap its yearly fireworks show for a laser show. The show was set up on the water, which Katherine Marlow thought was a better show for boat owners.

"It would have been better if it was later, or we could see the lasers better," she said. Marlow works at Miller's Landing, a resort in Bass Lake.

"It was also with music. If you were right there, you could hear the music," she said.

Adam Starechesky, a supervisor at Miller's Landing, wasn't present for last year's show but heard feedback from guests.

"Some people were pretty excited, because so many people were so worried about wildfires, but some people just wanted to see the fireworks, so they were pretty disappointed," he said.

Starechesky said the lack of fireworks didn't deter visitors, and they still had a busy day. Lake levels are higher now, so more people will be out on the water, he said.

"I think it's going to be exciting this year," he said.

Bass Lake is back to fireworks for the Fourth. Currently, there are no laser shows planned in Fresno or surrounding counties.

Firework Safety Tips

Do not try to relight fireworks. Soak extinguished fireworks in a bucket of water overnight.

When lighting fireworks, make sure people are at a safe distance.

Never light fireworks in a container.

Check fireworks instructions for storage instructions.

Observe local laws.

Never position a body directly over fireworks while lighting.

Don't experiment with home-made fireworks.

Altering or changing legal fireworks is recognized as illegally using fireworks, and violators can be fined.

California lawmakers unplug the state's electric car program

By Liam, Dillon and Chris Megerian – Los Angeles Times

In the Sacramento Bee, Wednesday, June 29, 2016

SACRAMENTO, Calif. - California took the lead in getting Teslas, Chevrolet Volts, Nissan Leafs and other low- and zero-emission cars on the road through a generous state incentive program that for years has offered thousands of dollars to people who want to buy them.

But in the state budget passed this month, Gov. Jerry Brown and lawmakers have cut the \$500 million originally earmarked for this popular subsidy and other efforts to make heavy-duty trucks more environmentally friendly down to zero, the result of a political impasse and questions over the future of the state's climate change programs.

Without the funds, the clean car program, which has helped put 150,000 low- and zero-emission vehicles on the road since 2009, is running out of money. Thousands of consumers applying for the subsidies each month now are pushed to a waiting list.

Unlike most budget cuts, the decision to slash funding isn't due to a lack of money.

Instead, the decision springs from concerns over the long-term viability of the state's cap-and-trade program, California's primary means of funding efforts to combat climate change. Some environmental advocates are worried that behind-the-scenes political negotiations between Brown and legislative leaders about cap-and-trade have led the state to hold on to the money as an incentive for lawmakers to reach a deal this summer on extending the life of the entire program, which is facing legal questions over whether it can keep operating past 2020.

"I think it's ridiculous to play politics with kids' lungs," said Dean Florez, a former state senator and member of the California Air Resources Board, the agency that regulates greenhouse gas emissions.

The clean car subsidies get their cash from auctions that are part of cap and trade. The program functions by capping how much greenhouse gas can be emitted into the atmosphere and requiring oil refineries, manufacturers and other companies to obtain permits, each allowing 1 metric ton of emissions. Those permits can be purchased at auctions or traded in a market, a system intended to provide a financial incentive to reduce emissions.

Although the latest auction of permits produced almost no revenue, the state had previously stockpiled \$1.4 billion in the fund. Some of that cash is left over from last year, when the governor and lawmakers also were unable to reach an agreement on how to spend it.

"With the urgency of the climate crisis, we really shouldn't delay in investing in projects that reduce emissions," said Bill Magavern, policy director for the Coalition for Clean Air.

A Brown administration spokeswoman didn't directly address questions about the use of existing climate change dollars as leverage to extend the program. But the governor does want a new law to ensure the program's future and he endorsed an extension through new legislation.

"An extension will not only provide market certainty, but will ensure ongoing funding for clean energy programs, especially in vulnerable communities," Brown spokeswoman Deborah Hoffman told the Los Angeles Times.

The clean vehicle programs are essential to the state's ambitious climate change goals. Air Resources Board Chairwoman Mary Nichols has said all internal combustion engine cars must be off the road by 2050 to meet Brown's target of drastically reducing greenhouse gas emissions by that time.

In 2009, the state began subsidizing consumers who wanted to buy cleaner cars. Currently, the state offers rebates of up to \$6,500 toward the purchase or lease of new vehicles that run on electricity, plug-in hybrids and fuel cells. The 150,000 cars on the road subsidized by the program include 33,000 Chevrolet Volts, 29,000 Nissan Leafs and 25,000 Tesla models.

More recently, the state added two incentives also funded by cap-and-trade dollars for low-income drivers in the San Joaquin Valley and Los Angeles to buy new and used clean cars. Programs targeted to these residents are considered particularly important not only because they struggle to afford electric cars, but also because they're often stuck behind the wheel of older, dirtier vehicles that cause more pollution.

Coupled with other state subsidies, low-income residents in those regions can receive as much as \$13,500 for a new electric vehicle.

The program managed by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has taken a 1972 Ford Courier, 1979 Chevrolet Impala, 1979 Ford Ranchero and hundreds of other cars 20 years and older off the road in favor of electric vehicles and hybrids.

A few months ago, Gabriel Lua, a 31-year-old mail carrier for a San Joaquin Valley school district, purchased a 2013 Chevrolet Volt to replace his 1987 Honda Civic. The Civic had been giving him exhaust headaches and made him worry about the health of his children, ages 3 and 5.

Even though the Civic had failed the state's smog test three times and was costing him hundreds of dollars a month in maintenance, Lua said he couldn't afford to replace it until he learned about the incentive program. The state covered more than half the new car's price tag.

"It saves me gas. It saves me money. I feel safer. And most important, it's for my kids," Lua said.

Sayed Sadredin, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said he's worried that others won't be able to receive the same deal Lua did and what that might mean for his community.

Sadredin said cars and heavy-duty trucks make up more than 65 percent of pollution in the valley. The clean car incentives are indispensable to meeting the region's climate change goals and its requirements under the federal Clean Air Act, he said, but the district expects to drain the last of its \$6.4 million for incentives within the next two months.

"That could be devastating to our efforts," Sadredin said.

Any San Joaquin Valley residents applying for vehicle subsidies now get placed on a waiting list, as do those seeking similar dollars in Los Angeles. In recent weeks, the website of the state's main low-emission vehicle rebate program has been updated to greet visitors with a graphic saying that it has run out of money and anyone eligible would go on a waiting list.

Automobile industry representatives also are concerned about the funding problems.

Carmakers signed agreements with the state committing to the production of cleaner vehicles with the understanding that public dollars would go toward incentive programs, said John Bozzella, the president and chief executive officer of Global Automakers, an umbrella group representing the U.S. divisions of 12 motor vehicle manufacturers.

"If you're measuring based on the requirements in the (zero-emission vehicle) program, the numbers are very low," Bozzella said. "And that would suggest to us that you need every tool in the toolbox."

Earlier this year, officials were operating under a different plan.

In January, Brown proposed spending \$500 million on low-carbon transportation programs in the coming year, including \$230 million on the primary low-emission rebate program for consumers and \$30 million to expand the programs targeted to low-income residents in the San Joaquin Valley and Los Angeles. The new dollars were supposed to get 100,000 additional clean cars on the road.

Earlier this month, a Brown administration finance official told a legislative budget committee that significantly lower than expected revenue from the most recent cap-and-trade auction contributed to the decision to hold back the cash.

But others, including Senate leader Kevin de Leon, D-Los Angeles, said the existing cap-and-trade money should be spent as soon as possible.

"Every time we don't spend money, more carbon is emitted into the atmosphere," De Leon said.

Erskine Fire impacts air quality

By Elizabeth Sanchez

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, June 28, 2016

The heavy winds that fanned the flames of the Erskine Fire also pushed the smoke and soot all over Kern County.

The eastern region is seeing a lot of smoke and spreading small particles, which can create severe health problems for residents.

"That matter is teeny tiny. We don't see it, but we smell it," said Heather Heinks, outreach and communication manager at San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "You can inhale it, and it can go into your bloodstream and have bad impacts."

She noted that in the valley areas, "we're not in havoc yet."

But it's worse in eastern Kern.

Glen Stephens, an air pollution control officer for the Eastern Kern Air Pollution Control District, said there's a lot of matter in the air, from Lake Isabella to Ridgecrest.

"We are seeing a lot of haze outside," Stephens said, noting the air was much worse Thursday.

Stephens said the winds were much stronger the day the fire started, impacting Ridgecrest the most. But since then, the wind has slowed down and the air has slowly improved.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says smoke can irritate your eyes and respiratory system and worsen chronic heart and lung disease.

But there are ways to protect yourself from wildfire smoke.

SJVAPCD urges residents to limit outdoor activities and to follow doctor's orders if you suffer from asthma or other lung diseases.

Stephens also recommends staying indoors and keeping the air as clean as possible by closing the fresh-air intake and filtering recycled air. The CDC says if you don't have an AC unit, the building may get extremely hot, and you should seek alternative shelter.