

Fourth of July blazes kept Valley firefighters busy

By Jim Guy, staff writer

The Fresno Bee, Thursday, July 5, 2012

Firefighters in Fresno and surrounding areas fought 72 fires on the Fourth of July -- many of them related to the use of illegal fireworks, Fresno Deputy Fire Chief Michael Despain said Thursday.

Despain was joined by fire officials from the Clovis Fire Department and Fresno County Fire in assessing the wave of fire calls that officials received during the holiday. Despain said he was especially surprised by the number of fires because the holiday took place in the middle of the week.

"I would have lost that bet," he said, because he anticipated fewer blazes because for most people, it was a one-day holiday before returning to work Thursday.

Additional details about the Fresno-area calls:

- Most of the blazes, including grass fires, were knocked down quickly and the total loss was limited to about \$30,000.
- Nine citations were issued to people using illegal fireworks. Most of those fines amount to \$1,000 or more.
- Firefighters received 191 calls for service.
- The bulk of the blazes happened between 5 p.m. and midnight.
- A very small percentage of fires were caused by people using legal fireworks in an unsafe fashion.
- There were no injuries because of the fires.

Visalia Battalion Chief Charlie Norman reported that his department was similarly busy, with five fireworks-related fires -- including one that spread to a home's garage. Norman said fire and police officers confiscated about 100 pounds of illegal fireworks.

Fire officials said it is hard to determine the source of the illegal munitions, which included powerful aerial mortars (which can launch high-explosive projectiles into the air), skyrockets and bottle rockets. The aerial explosives are an especially dangerous source of building and grass fires. Some are brought into California from neighboring states and others come from Mexico.

Four teams consisting of a fire investigator and police officers searched the Fresno area for people using the illegal pyrotechnics during the holiday evening.

The toll from illegal fireworks set off at such a rate might have caused more damage in earlier decades, when many homeowners had wood shingle roofs. Clovis Fire Chief Lee Kraft said the conversion to tile and composition roofs has been a big help in preventing more blazes.

Despain said the higher-than-normal breezes Wednesday were a mixed blessing for firefighters. The winds may have fanned some blazes but also dispersed some of the airborne particulates produced by the fireworks.

[While not nearly as bad as in some previous years, the Fresno metro area still saw big spikes in particulate matter from 9 p.m. to midnight on the Fourth, according to reports by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.](#)

An unfortunate side-effect of the fireworks -- both legal and illegal -- is the loss of frightened animals to area pet owners. Beth Caffrey, spokeswoman for the Central California Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals, said the shelter is loaded with cats and dogs that panicked and ran away in the last week -- 117 dogs, 56 puppies, 95 cats and 64 kittens.

She urged animal owners not to wait for their pets to return home. Instead, they should be proactive and look for them at area shelters.

Game lets you weigh in on future of Kern County

By James Burger, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, July 6, 2012

The Kern Council of Governments has turned the future into an online card game.

As part of its effort to comply with state laws that call for a reduction in the distance we travel in our cars, the regional planning agency is asking the public to go online and rank the things they want to change between now and 2050.

The tool it came up with is the Directions to 2050 "game," where players stack cards on a digital table, placing their most important priority at the top and the least at the bottom.

Is a walkable/bikeable community more important than passenger rail or road repair? Should the communities of Kern County ensure reliable water sources before they create public open spaces? Should run-down homes be revitalized or the core of cities remade with more dense housing and business?

Players can chime in on those options at www.directionsto2050.com.

Then they can see how their responses tracked with the whole survey and with people in their zip code.

Choices are organized into groups that tackle topics like transportation, energy and infrastructure.

So far, survey respondents have listed revitalization of rundown neighborhoods and business districts, fixing roads and improving the water supply among their top priorities.

The zip code issue is important, said KernCOG planner Becky Napier, because KernCOG is trying to help Kern's 11 cities and the county of Kern understand what their residents want.

But ultimately the survey is focused on meeting state mandates.

"The whole goal is to reduce your greenhouse gas emissions between now and 2035," Napier said.

The results of the online game -- and similar exercises conducted at a number of workshops around the county earlier this year -- will be combined with a 1,500-person formal phone survey to guide the next part of the Directions to 2050 project -- another round of community events.

Ultimately the information gathered will be used in KernCOG planning and in the work being done by the member cities and communities to meet mandates.

"We use it to educate our member agencies -- the cities and the county. We feel it's important to get the buy-in from the public," Napier said.

So far a few hundred people have visited the website and at least 60 have played the game.

Napier said she hopes a lot more people will get involved in describing how they want Kern County to tackle energy conservation, [air quality](#) improvements and making their neighborhoods more human-centered.