

[Bakersfield Californian Commentary, Tuesday, July 3, 2013](#)

## **LOIS HENRY: Firefighters in flak jackets--that's what the 4th has become**

By Lois Henry, Californian Columnist

You might think after five years of complete and utter failure to get even an iota of movement on my call to ban personal fireworks, I'd wise up.

Nope.

I'm a through-and-through American, meaning I DO NOT GIVE UP.

So, for the sixth year in a row, I'm here to say: We absolutely must ban personal fireworks.

Keep the professional shows. Expand them, even. But no more personal fireworks.

On a side note, I'm extremely happy the show is back at Bakersfield College. And the City of Bakersfield's free show at the Park at River Walk is a great addition!

But letting every yahoo with a match go wild for the sake of "tradition" is an annual disaster.

It's not just the illegal fireworks (that's anything that leaves the ground in case you need a refresher) that are dangerous. The legal stuff is just as bad when used improperly.

And, frankly, the legal stuff is just cover for the illegal stuff, anyway, making it nearly impossible to round up the massive amount of bottle rockets and Roman candles shot into the night sky.

Mix with alcohol and it all adds up to chaos.

I know, I've done the ride-alongs and seen normally sane, upstanding folks -- teachers, electricians, clerks, etc. -- react like methed-up parolees when fire fighters cite them for illegal fireworks.

Speaking of which, the city and county enforcement teams will be out again this year vainly trying to stem the tide of illegal fireworks.

They'll be wearing flak jackets, something I've mentioned before but no one seems to blink an eye.

I repeat: Firefighters have to wear body armor to get through the night on July 4th.

Think about how absurd that is!

"We've had people throw lit fireworks in their faces, they throw things at our engines, they've broken the windows out," said Bakersfield City Fire Chief Douglas Greener. "You have alcohol, lots of illegal devices. It creates a mob mentality."

Complete chaos.

And remember, all these extra people, firefighters, cops, dispatch and admin, are working on OT. Yeah, some of it's paid for by fireworks booth permit fees or fireworks citations. But not all of it. Certainly not the regular fire crews who spend the entire night racing from one fire and illegal fireworks call to the next.

Even with all those extra hands, it's still not enough. Over the last five years as our population and illegal firework activity has increased, the number of citations hasn't kept pace.

The good guys are racing in quicksand. We either need to quadruple our forces or ban all personal fireworks, making it enforcement a whole lot easier.

Add to that the injuries, property damage, potential for huge, out-of-control fires, and the overload on our already overloaded animal shelters and banning fireworks is a no brainer for me.

Then, of course, there's the quirky little issue of air pollution.

Personal fireworks are veritable factories for particulate matter (PM), which the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) claims can cause "premature death" even from very brief exposures.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District won't let us burn a log in the fireplace during winter in order to keep "deadly" PM down. So where is the district on fireworks?

Nowhere.

It has no plans to restrict fireworks, first, because that could interfere with interstate commerce, according to Seyed Sadredin, director of the district.

And, second, the EPA doesn't care. It gives July 4th PM an automatic pass.

The EPA has allowances for exceptional events so things like wildfires aren't counted against the valley's air compliance.

"Typically, you have to go through extensive demonstrations, and submit hundreds of pages of proof to the EPA for them to give an allowance," Sadredin said. "But they made a preemptive ruling that the 4th of July is excepted."

Mind you, the standard for PM is 35 micrograms per cubic meter over a 24-hour average.

After the 4th, our levels spike to 700 or 800 micrograms per cubic meter.

Hmmm.

Makes you wonder how deadly PM really is if it's A-OK with the EPA that we all suck in a mini volcano of PM once every year.

But that's a topic for another column.

Back to banning personal fireworks.

Look, I know I'm tilting at windmills here. Even our local fire chiefs aren't going to ask their respective boards to consider a ban.

"In my perfect world, we wouldn't have personal fireworks. We would join the good portion of California cities and counties that have instituted a total ban," Chief Greener said. "That's my personal opinion."

He felt we were lucky last year that we didn't have more property damage or injuries or even a death, as happened in 2004 when 45-year-old Ray Reilly III was killed by a modified Piccolo Pete.

"Playing with fire is never a good idea," Greener said.

I could not agree more.