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Do Not Try This at Home

By Nick Marnell



Happy 4th of July Lamorinda Photos Kevin Goto

The combination of July 4 falling on a Saturday night coupled with severe drought conditions will have Lamorinda fire agencies on high alert this holiday weekend, as officials once again warn those who mess with illegal fireworks of the potential disastrous consequences.

Each year, dozens of people are injured by fireworks and firecrackers in Contra Costa County, according to Stephen Healy, fire chief of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. "Some of these injuries have been severe, including the loss of hands and fingers," he said.

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District investigator Vic Massenkoff recalled a pyrotechnics incident that he responded to years ago.

Three teenagers were driving along a highway, the front floor of the passenger side of their car loaded with two and a half inch mortar shells. The passenger in the front seat fired the shells out the side window. One of the shells bounced off the front door of the car and caromed into the pile of explosives on the floor by the front seat. The driver lost control of the car as the mortar shells exploded. The young man sitting shotgun took the full brunt of the blast in his face and on his torso.

"Mortar shells and skyrockets can cause damage four or five blocks away," said Massenkoff, providing a terrifying perspective to the seriousness of the accident.

Playing with illegal fireworks can cause more than bodily harm. Two boys were shooting bottle rockets in Moraga behind the Rheem Shopping Center in 2009. One of the rockets shot sideways into dry brush and started a fire, which burned five acres and took 78 firefighters to control, according to Healy.

It turned out that one of the boys was supplied the bottle rockets by his mother. "When the other boy's mother found out (later), she brought her son to station 41. The on-duty captain called me," said Healy, who noted that the mother who provided the bottle rockets was prosecuted by the Contra Costa County district attorney. "The consequences of a fire started illegally with fireworks or firecrackers can be severe. Criminal charges, injuries, litigation, and cost-recovery for extinguishing the fire, to name a few," said the chief.

Massenkoff pointed out an additional negative consequence of illegal fireworks activity. "Two years ago, we had active fires to respond to, but we had no one to send to cover them, because of all of the fireworks-related fires," he said.

"All fireworks of any type are illegal to possess and use in Contra Costa County," said Lon Goetsch, ConFire assistant chief. "We have many public displays throughout the county - east, central and west. Please enjoy those public displays."

Saving human life is paramount, but firefighters are also charged with protecting the environment, which is often destroyed because of the lack of sound human judgment. Goetsch stressed that the risk factor of using illegal fireworks has been upped this year because of the

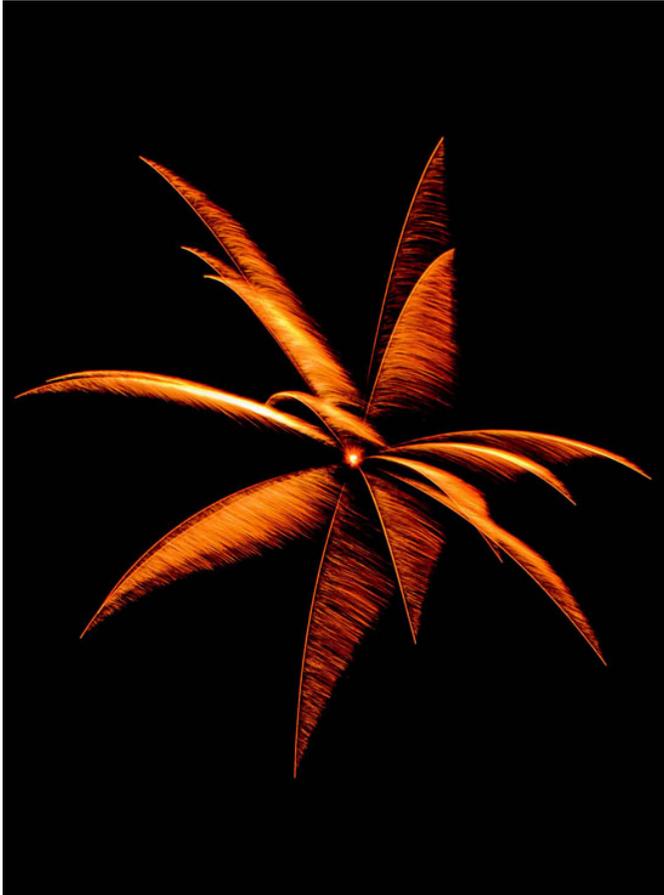
serious drought conditions. "It's a real problem and it's a real danger," he said.

"And this year, it's going to be bad."

Moraga Fireworks Display Fundraiser

Help the Town of Moraga reach its fundraising goal of \$25,000 for the 2015 fireworks show. A minimum donation of \$50 per rocket will help offset costs to continue this event. Donate online (<https://secure.rec1.com/CA/moraga-parks-recreation/Donations/Buy-a-Rocket/7643>) or send a check to: Town of Moraga, Parks and Recreation, 2100 Donald Drive, Moraga, CA 94556, Attn: Buy-A-Rocket.

Fireworks will kick off at dark on July 4 over the Moraga Golf Course, on Moraga Way. Parking is available at the Moraga Commons and overflow parking is available near Moraga Center.



Had this Moraga bottle rocket fire of six years ago occurred in 2015, the environmental damage could have been much higher. Photo courtesy Moraga-Orinda Fire District

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