

Stop endangering our community on July 4

BY SARAH LIFTON

Every year, it's like clockwork.

Shortly after nightfall on Independence Day, a series of booms, bangs, shrieks and blasts begin to split the air, and that's the cue for me, and many of my neighbors, to start holding our collective breath. What we fear most is that the next sound we hear will be sirens, for these aren't the explosions of the professional fireworks shows taking place all over the county. They're the sounds of private—and illegal—celebrations very close to home, and we're terrified that whoever is responsible for these amateur pyrotechnics will finally run out of luck and set our community on fire.

Here in Olivenhain, the threat of wildfire isn't just an abstraction. We live in the wildland-urban interface, surrounded by nature and a whole lot of fuel, courtesy of the Escondido Creek watershed and all the brush and detritus that washes down from upstream. Our community has been evacuated several times because of wildfire—a process that the city's own plan now estimates will take four hours. (Other, more recent calculations project even longer evacuation times.) CalFire has designated Olivenhain a "Very High Fire Severity Area," and a number of insurance companies have redlined us. Many neighbors have had their homeowner insurance canceled.

And that's without factoring in the threat from our scofflaw neighbors. For every firework that's lit, the hazard to our community increases exponentially. Only last year, a pyrotechnic device at a gender reveal party ignited the El Dorado fire near Yucaipa, which burned thousands of acres and killed a firefighter. After two years of record-breaking fires in our state and our current record-breaking drought, I shudder to think what destruction a wayward firework could wreak in a heavily populated area like ours. Yes, we all know that fireworks can cause bodily injury and property damage, regardless of location, but under the current conditions, a fire could decimate countless homes in Olivenhain and beyond, devastate precious natural habitats and injure or kill many people and domestic and wild animals.

So why do some neighbors persist in flouting the law on July 4, recklessly putting Olivenhain and neighboring communities at extreme risk? I wish I knew. Even more, I wish they would stop. Patriotic fervor on our nation's birthday is one thing. Gratuitously and unlawfully imperiling entire communities is quite another.

It's not as if there aren't other options for celebrating the Fourth of July. This year, public fireworks displays have been scheduled in Vista, San Marcos, Oceanside, Del Mar, Escondido, La Jolla, Legoland, Sea World and San Diego Bay, among others. One year, some neighbors and I set up chairs at the La Costa Park and Ride to take in

several North County fireworks shows. At Moonlight Beach you can do the same thing. The Encinitas Fire Department reminds residents annually, in multiple ways, that fireworks and sky lanterns are illegal. And yet a small number of irresponsible people choose to act as if the laws don't apply to them.

For the sake of our city and our safety, I urge everyone who witnesses illegal fireworks in Encinitas to report them immediately to the Sheriff's Department. You can bet I'll be doing the same. The lives and homes we save may be our own.

— Sarah Lifton, an Encinitas-based writer, is a board member and the outreach and communications coordinator for the Olivenhain Fire Safe Council (olivenhainfsc.org)