



Fire & Emergency Services

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Flying Lanterns

By: Jessica Schaer

Flying Lanterns, also commonly referred to as sky lanterns or Chinese lanterns, have been traditionally used in Asia and elsewhere to celebrate festivities. In recent years many North Americans have adopted the tradition of releasing flying lanterns as a symbolic way of expressing good luck, or as celebration at weddings and other events. However, growing concern about their potential fire hazard has led to growing bans.

Flying lanterns (as seen here) are traditionally constructed from oiled rice paper on a bamboo frame, and are propelled by the heat of a small candle or waxy fuel cell. When lit, the flame heats the air inside the lantern lowering its density which in turn causes it to float, similar to a hot air balloon. This lanterns modern design sold online and at retail stores, features a lightweight metal frame enables it to reach heights of 1,000 feet with flight times of 15 to 20 minutes. The sky lantern is only airborne as long as the flame stays alight, after which it descends to the ground.



The risk exists when these lanterns return to the ground still alight. The lantern by its very design is flammable, so the potential for fire is imminent especially if the lantern land on flammable vegetation, forests, or structures. This threat multiplies especially when these lanterns are set off en mass as they are often done at weddings and other events to enhance the visual effect (pictured below). Though its frame may burn out within seconds, the flame source (a thick waxy substance or candle) remains lit well beyond impact with the ground. Their uncontrolled and unpredictable flight path means that the lanterns can land anywhere and has been the culprit for numerous forest, field, and house fires worldwide. The danger does not stop there. These lanterns have also been reported to cause delays at airports as they pose a threat to aircrafts and reduce pilot's visual. Farmers have also attributed numerous deaths of cattle after their livestock ingest the remnant frames of these lanterns.



As a direct result, several countries including Austria, parts of Germany, the UK, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Brazil and Australia have banned the sale and possession of these lanterns and penalties range from hefty fines to 3 years jail time. Several U.S. States have also restricted or limited their use. It's only a matter of time before similar bans are placed in Canada. In fact, based on these concerns the Ontario Fire Marshal issued Fire Marshal's Communiqué 2009-07 to inform department officials and the public regarding this product and its related fire safety concerns. The OFM has also written Health Canada's Consumer Product Safety Bureau

to request necessary actions are made to prevent this product from being sold in Canada. In the meantime, Fire Departments exercise provisions under the Fire Code [Division B, Sentence 2.4.4.1.(3), or Article 2.4.4.3 or Article 2.6.3.4.] as well as through inspection orders as applicable. The Municipality of Grey Highlands Fire Chief Rod Leeson urges member of the community to refrain from the purchase and use of flying lanterns, and requests retailers to comply in removing them from their shelves.

For enquiries regarding the Flying Lantern and potential fire hazards, please contact: Jessica Schaer, Public Fire and Life Safety Educator (519) 986-1216 Ext. 236.