

Safety groups: Snuff out fireworks

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Along with baseball and apple pie, many Americans think setting off roman candles and bottle rockets is a great Fourth of July tradition. But several national safety organizations say the activity is too dangerous and that access to fireworks should be far more restricted in states such as South Carolina, where fireworks retailers are nearly as common as roadside fruit stands. "They are extremely dangerous to people, and the only way we can deal with the problem is to restrict their use," said Todd Turiff of the National Society to Prevent Blindness, which supports tougher fireworks restrictions. Turiff said efforts by his and other organizations to educate the public about safer ways to handle fireworks have failed to lower injury rates. So this year, their focus has moved away from publicizing safety measures and toward urging people to avoid using fireworks altogether. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, 9,700 people were treated in emergency rooms in 1989 for injuries resulting from fireworks. That injury rate has remained consistent for the past decade. "It may not sound all that high, but you have to understand that most fireworks-related injuries occur only twice a year, around July 4 and at New Year's," Turiff said. "It's a very serious problem." South Carolina is one of 37 states that allows the sale of fireworks in some form. Only 13 states have banned fireworks sales altogether, though several permit only sparklers. Most restrict sales more than South Carolina, and countless cities nationwide, including Spartanburg, forbid them. Debate periodically surfaces in the South Carolina Legislature about banning the sale of fireworks, usually after a string of fireworks-related deaths. An outright ban never has gained widespread support, though legislators have enacted increasingly strict regulations on licensing and the building of new fireworks stores. Next year, a bill is expected to pass that would ban the sale of bottle rockets in South Carolina. "Good riddance," said Paul Brock, owner of Poor Paul's in Cowpens and Circle Fireworks on Asheville Highway outside Spartanburg. Brock said bottle rockets are the No. 1 seller for most vendors, but he said he agrees they pose too much potential for injury. Brock has been in the fireworks business for 35 years, and he said restrictions never have been tougher. Still, he doubts fireworks will ever be completely banned, as they are in the neighboring states of North Carolina and Georgia. "It's a lucrative business, and they're a powerful lobby," said John Miles, manager of regulatory services for the State Fire Marshal's Office. But South Carolina also is credited in the industry as having some of the toughest enforcement in the country. John Conkling, executive director of the American Pyrotechnics Association, described South Carolina as a "model state," in that it has few restrictions on the sale of traditional fireworks, but has "very, very strict" enforcement against people who violate regulations. Conkling estimates that one-third of all fireworks-related injuries are the result of unsafe fireworks made by bootleggers, and he advocates that more states follow the example of South Carolina in trying to crack down on such illegal fireworks producers. Bill Porcel, special agent in charge of regulation for the state Board of Pyrotechnic Safety, dismisses suggestions that South Carolina is lax in restricting fireworks. "South Carolina probably has the toughest enforcement of any state," he said. "We're constantly getting calls from other states asking for advice." Since 1976, fireworks have been regulated nationally by the Consumer Product Safety Commission, which requires certain standards and labeling. Under the Hazardous Substances Act, Congress also lowered the permissible charge in firecrackers and banned such explosives as cherry bombs and M-80s. Fireworks are broken down into Class B - those one sees at fireworks shows, and which the general public can't buy legally - and Class C - those commonly available in states such as South Carolina. Turiff said bans in some states are useless, because buyers so often need only drive to a neighboring state. In Spartanburg, for instance, Brock said most of his business comes from out of state. The Society to Prevent Blindness has joined with other organizations, including the National Safety Council and the National Fire Protection Association, in drawing up model legislation for statewide bans, Turiff said. He doubts a federal ban would be feasible, because fireworks play a role in some religions and because they are produced and sold on some American Indian reservations. "I think it's going to be a long, hard battle in the states," Turiff said. "It's going to take a lot of effort." In the meantime, Brock, who said he approves of regulating the industry, reports that business is booming. He can't account for it, but this is a record year for sales. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the states that have banned all Class C fireworks are Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware,

Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Vermont and West Virginia. States that allow only sparklers or snakes, or both, include Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland and Pennsylvania. States that allow Class C fireworks with no restrictions beyond the federal regulations include Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, South Dakota and Tennessee. States that allow Class C fireworks, but have additional restrictions of varying degrees, include California, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Utah and Virginia. Hawaii and Nevada have no fireworks laws beyond the county level.