



LIKE A BOMB

Fireworks will go off like a bomb unless urgent action is taken on their storage and transportation

The Union has called for the Government to take urgent action over the storage and transportation of fireworks to prevent a similar tragedy to the fatal explosion at Marlie Farm near Lewes in East Sussex nearly a year ago. At the height of the fireworks season – between July and January – thousands of tonnes of fireworks are transported across the UK and stored in the same ISO storage containers that were at the centre of the explosion on 3 December last year at Festival Fireworks which killed Brian Wembridge and Geoff Wicker and injured another nine firefighters, a police officer and two members of the public.

The Union has said that emergency services and the public are being put in needless danger because of confused regulation, lack of monitoring and the poor labelling of imported fireworks. And it has accused the Government and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) of being slow in their reaction to the dangers uncovered at other incidents during the Marlie Farm investigations.

The Union has also warned that four major fireworks incidents in the UK and similar incidents in six other countries found: The labelling on imported fireworks is unreliable; regulation is hampered by too many agencies being involved with little co-operation between them; serious concerns that ISO containers are inappropriate for the storage or transportation of fireworks; poor information and guidance for emergency services seriously hampered their ability to prepare and successfully execute their response.

LGA, CFOA join call for action

Following the FBU's lead, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) have called for "a root and branch review of the way fireworks are regulated in this country".

The two organisations are pressing for "greater controls and safeguards for the import, storage, distribution and sale of fireworks, with fresh attention to internet access and distribution". The £64m-a-year firework industry imports up to 20,000 tonnes of fire-

works annually, with the amount of fireworks circulating in an illegal market as high as 20% of this, they say.

In a statement on behalf of the LGA, Councillor Les Byrom said: "People continue to be blighted by the misuse of fireworks and it is not acceptable for an illegal trade to flourish at the expense of our citizens. There needs to be more effective control of what are essentially explosives and especially at this time of heightened risk. Some safeguards have been in place but the legislation needs to be revisited as it may no longer be sufficient."

Manufacturers' concerns

Concerns about current regulations come as the largest supplier of fireworks to the UK – Standard Fireworks – recently withdrew from the British Pyrotechnics Association (BPA), the fireworks industry association whose members must follow strict codes of practice on the sale of fireworks. In a letter circulated to chief fire officers Standard Fireworks wrote of its work to "continue to uphold safety and quality standards in the UK fireworks

Test with a 20' ISO container full of 60g rockets. Source: <http://www.chaf.info/>



industry” through lobbying of “trading standards officers, MPs and emergency services and others”. This work, it explained, could have been “jeopardised” by continued membership of the BPA since it had not accepted proposals that included agreeing “a mechanism for reporting potentially unsafe or illegal products found in the UK”.

UN: ‘something has to be done’

Adding to those demanding action is the United Nations, whose Committee on Dangerous Goods (Working Group on Explosives) concluded at a meeting in July 2007 that “something has to be done” in terms of applying restrictions in relation to the classification of fireworks. This came after the group, meeting to discuss, among other issues, the transportation of fireworks, heard from a UK expert who had “produced evidence from his experience that unexpected, violent

explosions can occur” even with fireworks with a classification of a lower Net Explosive Quantity (NEQ), a measure equal to around one quarter of the gross weight that is used to regulate fireworks.

Potential bombs

John McGhee, the FBU national officer responsible for health and safety who has been spearheading an ongoing FBU investigation into Marlie Farm and the lessons to be learned, said that under current regulations “Guy Fawkes could have simply applied for a licence to store the gunpowder he tried to blow up Parliament with.

“The quantity of explosives in ISO containers explodes with the same force as artillery shells or RAF bombs. Now we understand that Marlie Farm has re-opened and already the company has taken the supply of 38 tonnes of fireworks – six to seven times the amount of explosives

Guy Fawkes had planned to use.

“At present there is no effective regulation of fireworks standards, labelling, transportation or storage. Government and its agencies have done nothing to properly address what we have already learned about firework-linked explosions at incidents in the UK and other countries. A number of incidents involving fireworks stored in ISO containers have happened in the UK. An incident immediately prior to Marlie Farm resulted in a prosecution in West Yorkshire.

“Despite the evidence that fireworks stored in ISO containers present a significant risk of explosion when involved in fire, no guidance or instruction has been issued to emergency services. The last guidance on explosive incidents was issued to the emergency services in 1991. And this has been removed from the Department of Communities and Local Government’s fire and resilience website. It is a disgrace.”

“We need much better co-operation between Customs, HSE, trading standards, fire service and police to achieve an acceptable level of risk. Firefighters, other members of the emergency services and the public are being put needlessly at risk by this inaction. It is unacceptable and only underlines the need for an independent public inquiry into the explosion at Marlie Farm.”

Pressing Government

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack has written to Fire Minister Parmjit Dhanda expressing “extreme concern” about the possibility of a repeat of the kind of incident that occurred almost a year ago at Marlie Farm.

Pointing out that since December 2006, neither the Government, HSE nor any other regulatory agency has taken any action, the Union has called for the minister to review urgently the Manufacture and Storage of Explosives Regulations 2005 and the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Regulations.



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Fireworks for Chinese New Year Hong Kong China. China is a major importer of fireworks into the UK.

➔ More: www.fbu.org.uk/workplace/healthsafety