

TESTIMONY OF LAWRENCE PIAZZA, M.D., PRESIDENT

MAINE SOCIETY OF EYE PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS

IN OPPOSITION TO

L.D. 1187, AN ACT TO ALLOW THE SALE AND USE OF CONSUMER FIREWORKS

Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
Room 436, Cross State Office Building
Friday, May 1, 2009, 10:00 a.m.

Good morning Senator Gerzofsky, Representative Haskell, and distinguished members of the Committee. I am Larry Piazza, M.D., testifying today on behalf of the Maine Society of Eye Physicians and Surgeons, which I serve as President and for the Maine Medical Association in opposition to L.D. 1187. The Society represents the interests of seventy-two ophthalmologists in the state. I have practiced comprehensive ophthalmology in Hancock and Washington counties for the past 17 years. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the term, ophthalmologists are medical doctors who specialize in the medical care and surgery of the eye. Following completion of medical school, an ophthalmologist would typically complete a one year internship in internal medicine, a three year residency in the treatment of medical and surgical diseases of the eye and an optional one to two year fellowship in a subspecialty area of the visual system.

The ophthalmologists of the state are alarmed that consumer fireworks may be legalized in Maine, resulting, we believe, in injuries to children and adults alike. History has shown that many of the more devastating injuries impact the eye and ultimately vision, which is why we are here today. Presently, Maine is one of the more restrictive states regarding consumer fireworks according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. We respectfully suggest that this is where we should stay.

While we appreciate the intent to limit sales to persons over the age of 21 years, there is no prohibition in the bill of possession or use by minors, just on the sale. As most states prohibit the sale of fireworks to minors, adults are the source of providing or making available these products to children. Hence, I think that all of us understand what the likely result of passage of this legislation will be.

According to data furnished by the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission, nationally there are more than 1500 eye injuries each year as a result of fireworks (2006 report). Children and youth under age 20 sustain 47% of these eye injuries, and males of all ages are three times more likely to be hurt than females. Although most eye injuries are contusions or lacerations of the treat-and-release variety, serious and devastating injuries also occur. While the treatment of eye injuries are within the scope of my expertise, I should also note that there were more than 9000 bodily injuries of all types from fireworks in 2006 nationally. As serious as eye injuries may be, they represent only a portion of the harm caused by these dangerous products.

Firecrackers were associated with the greatest number of injuries, the 2006 report found. Sparklers accounted for one-third of the injuries to children under five years old. Rockets and bottle rockets were related to more than three-quarters of the most serious injuries. Bystanders are at real risk of injury within 100 feet of fireworks and ideally should be at least 500 feet away. Viewing a public fireworks display is by far the safest choice parents can make for their children, as in 2006, fewer than 100 injuries were related to public fireworks displays nationwide.

One-third of the injuries to eyes caused by fireworks result in permanent eye damage and one-fourth in permanent vision loss or blindness. Almost one in 20 victims lose all useful vision or require removal of the injured eye. One-fourth of all eye injuries caused by consumer fireworks happen to bystanders.

The non-profit organization Prevent Blindness America supports the development and enforcement of bans on the importation, sale, and use of all fireworks and sparklers, except those used in authorized public displays by competent licensed professionals. The organization warns that there is no safe way for nonprofessionals to use fireworks.

Even fireworks that many people consider safe represent a threat to the eye. For children under the age of five, apparently harmless sparklers account for one-third of all fireworks injuries. Sparklers can burn at nearly 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. A sparkler's intense heat can burn not only skin, but also the eyes. Corneal burns from sparklers can cause deep scars and have lead to permanent vision loss.

I understand that the primary reason for the bill is economic. Certainly the eyes and vision of Maine's children are more important to our state than the small amount of economic benefit derived from the sale of these products.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.