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Hawaii Shoots Down Use of Sky Lanterns

By Erica E. Phillips

Hawaii's governor on Tuesday signed a law immediately banning sky lanterns—miniature, illuminated hot-air balloons that rise when a wax fuel cell is lighted—prompted by concerns they might start fires.

Gov. Neil Abercrombie, a Democrat, signed the statewide ban on "aerial luminaries," which are increasingly popular at weddings across the U.S. Violators face as much as a year in prison and potential fines of \$1,000.

Sky lanterns, about two feet wide by three feet tall, have soared in popularity since they were featured in the 2010 animated film "Tangled" and in "The Hangover Part II," from last summer, according to wedding planners and retailers.

But fire chiefs across the U.S. have warned of the potential danger. Last year, local media reports quoted fire officials blaming a 900-acre forest fire near Myrtle Beach, S.C., on sky lanterns that had settled into a wooded area.

The lanterns, typically imported from China, are often made from flame-retardant rice paper. They rise into the air when a wax fuel cell attached at the base is lighted on fire, says Dave Craig, a fireworks retailer in northern Virginia. "They've just really taken off in popularity," said Mr. Craig, who added that sky lanterns now make up 25% to 30% of his business.

Ryan I. Yamane, a Hawaii state representative, introduced the legislation in January after several fire departments in the state raised concerns when lanterns were used during New Year's celebrations. A study found the lanterns remain airborne for more than four minutes but don't fully extinguish for more than 10 minutes.

"Even though these lanterns look beautiful in the sky, they pose a serious and dangerous threat of fire," Mr. Yamane said in a statement.

Fire marshals in Massachusetts, as well as California, Oregon and elsewhere, have also raised concerns in recent months.

Scott Wolfson, a director at the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, said concern over sky-lantern safety "hasn't risen to a point" that would prompt the commission to issue a safety warning.

A search of roughly 8,000 consumer-incident reports at the commission's website didn't turn up a sky-lantern complaint.



Officials say sky lanterns can ignite fires after they descend. Above, people in Seattle released lanterns in May