Resolution 2013-3

RESOLUTION OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE FIRE MARSHALS ON THE FIRE HAZARD POSED BY SKY LANTERNS AND RECOMMENDATION TO IMPOSE STATE-LEVEL BANS ON THEIR SALE AND USE

Whereas sky lanterns – also called Chinese lanterns, wish lanterns, sky candles, fire balloons, Kongming lights, and khoom fay – have been used in some Asian cultures for centuries, they are a new product in the U.S. They are readily available, and there are many websites advertising them for prices that range from about $1 to $3. The increasing popularity of the devices during mass launches to commemorate events such as holidays or weddings, or as decorations at other personal events, suggests that their use will grow; and

Whereas sky lanterns are essentially miniature hot-air balloons, with a lightweight paper bag and typically a paraffin-impregnated cloth or paper fuel element, in which the burning fuel heats the air inside the bag, making it buoyant enough to float as much as a mile high; and

Whereas the Internet has numerous sites, including YouTube, that provide instructions or videos on how to make sky lanterns. While homemade sky lanterns are somewhat tricky to make, they also employ different types of flame sources, not all of which may extinguish as readily as commercial products; and

Whereas event organizers typically provide sky lanterns to the guests and spectators to light and launch, and thus there is no control over the device once released. As they can rise quite high into the air and travel several miles, it is unlikely that the people launching them know where they go or where they land; and

Whereas while there is currently only anecdotal data currently available on fires caused by sky lanterns, there seems to be widespread recognition by fire officials that time will provide more empirical data. Further, because there is currently not a code in the National Fire Incident Reporting System that is specific to sky lanterns, at least some incidents may not have been captured in the data system or were coded as something else; and

Whereas at least 25 states and many jurisdictions have banned sky lanterns outright or put controls on their use, and many more are planning such action in the future. In general, statutes have been promulgated specifically for sky lanterns as products, or they have been interpreted as falling under the authority of fireworks regulations, the state fire code, or open flame restrictions during times of dry/hazardous weather conditions, wildland fire hazard, and in proximity to buildings. In some cases the authority of the State Fire Marshal has been invoked to ban the product. In some cases the authority is left to local jurisdictions.
Whereas the National Association of State Fire Marshals has a history of identifying and acting on emerging hazards in hopes of preventing large numbers of deaths, injuries and property loss.

Therefore, be it resolved that the National Association of State Fire Marshals:

1. Strongly encourages states to ban the sale and use of sky lanterns through whichever means is most expedient for them. Banning the use of sky lanterns is important to help control homemade devices as well as those purchased from various sources.

2. Strongly discourages retail outlets, Internet vendors and promoters from selling and marketing sky lanterns.

3. Calls on all public events facilities and organizers, and their insurers, to prohibit the use of sky lanterns.

4. Will attempt to update the National Fire Incident Reporting System to include a code for sky lanterns to enable more precise data collection in the future.