

The Spark of Tradition vs. The Tide of Conservation: Fourth of July Fireworks Under Threat

By: KATHERINE M. CLEMENTS

Conserving our natural resources — specifically waterways and marine life — is essential to a healthful environment for all. There are some, however, who feel that one of our most honored traditions, fireworks celebrations, are in danger of extinction due to regulation overreach from environmental agencies such as the California Coastal Commission (CCC).

One of those individuals is Sandy Purdon, President and Executive Producer of H.P. Purdon & Company, Inc., and founder of the Big Bay Boom. In an interview with The Log, Purdon explained how increasingly stringent conditions imposed by the CCC are reshaping the future of pyrotechnic events held along the coastline. His fear is that the Fourth of July fireworks tradition will become a thing of the past, especially along the Southern California coast, where displays have long served as beloved community cornerstones.

“The requirements for our permits now include a long list of obligations that cost money or impact the show itself,” Purdon said. “We’re required to reduce the size, type, and weight of the fireworks; install netting on barges; deploy safety boats to collect debris; and conduct cleanups both onshore and underwater — up to 45 feet below where the barges are stationed.”

Those tasks are just part of a much larger web of regulations designed to allay the negative impacts of fireworks on wildlife. Event organizers are also required to monitor sensitive bird nesting areas, separate and photograph all collected debris, submit reports to several agencies, and commission an expensive feasibility study on replacing fireworks with drone shows.

Though San Diego serves as a high-profile example, these requirements aren’t unique to one city. Coastal communities up and down Southern California — places where fireworks over the water are as culturally embedded as parades and backyard barbecues — are experiencing similar pressures. Cities like Long Beach, Ocean Beach, and La Jolla have either canceled fireworks or turned to drones, often citing cost, permit challenges, or environmental

concerns. Ocean Beach, for instance, attempted a small drone show several years ago but was unable to raise enough money to repeat it. This year, the community has no celebration planned.

Purdon fears that if this trend continues, there’s risk of losing a cherished part of our coastal culture. “All of these measures will cost well north of \$100,000,” said Purdon. “The Port of San Diego helps cover some of it, but much of the funding has to come from our limited cash budget and in-kind support.”

For decades, waterfront fireworks displays have been fixtures of July Fourth celebrations in communities from San Diego to Santa Barbara and beyond. But according to Purdon, the rise in environmental regulations meant to protect the environment are instead leading to the loss of popular events such as San Diego’s Big Bay Boom. One of the largest and most iconic coastal shows in the state, Big Bay Boom has fought an ongoing battle that highlights a broader, statewide issue: the growing tension between environmental conservation and the preservation of tradition.

The CCC’s mandate is to protect marine and coastal environments — a justified mission supported by many. However, the cumulative effect of regulatory burdens is beginning to take its toll on public celebrations that have brought communities together for generations on a single special day of the year. SeaWorld, another long-time venue for coastal pyrotechnics, is also under scrutiny, adding to the concern that fireworks could eventually disappear from California’s coastal calendar altogether.

For Purdon, the shift toward drone shows isn’t a viable alternative, especially at the scale needed to replace a show like the Big Bay Boom. “Drones are visually impressive, but they have a lot of limitations,” he said. “They attract birds — which fireworks do not — and they can’t fly for more than about 15 minutes. Plus, you’d need launch pads the size of football fields, and those don’t exist near most coastal show sites. Drones also can’t operate from barges, and when they fail, they drop straight into the water, polluting it with batteries and electronics.”

From a public enjoyment standpoint,

Purdon believes fireworks still offer something drones can’t replicate. “Fireworks can be seen from 360 degrees around the bay,” he said. “Drones are directional. And frankly, they’re not as exciting. We’ve seen other communities try, and the public doesn’t respond the same way.”

According to Purdon, environmental monitoring conducted over the years has not shown long-term harm to wildlife or marine life. “Independent water testing in 2015 found no damage. Video monitoring of the marine mammals showed them sleeping through the show. We’ve had no negative environmental reports in 25 years — aside from the [obvious] occasional dog frightened by the sound,” he added, noting that pet owners are encouraged to keep animals safely indoors during the short display window.

Despite the challenges, San Diego’s Big Bay Boom continues to generate enormous community and economic benefits, welcoming over 100,000 visitors each year and producing more than \$100 million in regional economic impact. “That impact is why our partners, including the Port of San Diego, continue to support us — a port that has garnered significant recognition and achieved numerous milestones in its journey to become a “green port,” demonstrating a strong commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainable maritime operations. For every dollar spent on the show, the return is about \$22,” Purdon said. “This event fills a critical holiday gap when the Convention Center is usually dark. It keeps hotels and restaurants busy and gives people a reason to come down to the waterfront.”

Still, many worry that rising costs and mounting restrictions may gradually squeeze out fireworks displays across the entire Southern California coastline. What’s happening in San Diego could soon become the new normal from Ventura to Imperial Beach. While environmental protections are essential, organizers argue that the balance has tilted too far. “We all want to protect the environment,” Purdon said, “but we also need to protect the cultural traditions that bring us together. If we lose those, we lose something bigger than a show — we lose part of our shared identity.”



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The conversation isn’t just about San Diego, of course. It’s about America’s coastlines. And as the nation approaches its 250th birthday in 2026, the timing is especially significant. As communities and local governments weigh the pros and cons of what we value most: environmental conservation or conserving celebratory traditions.

For those celebrating with friends and family this Fourth of July, there are meaningful ways you can help. For a greener Independence Day, consider alternatives to traditional fireworks, such as LED glow gear or contributing to local environmental initiatives. If fireworks are legal and used at home, take extra precautions — clear the surrounding area to reduce fire risk, and be diligent about collecting all debris to prevent pollution. On beaches, personal fireworks should be avoided entirely due to the high risk of wildfires, harm to marine ecosystems, and disturbance to wildlife. Whenever possible, support professionally managed displays and follow all local regulations — these steps not only enhance safety but also help ensure this treasured tradition can continue responsibly for years to come.

For more information on the Big Bay Boom’s environmental compliance and statewide implications, visit www.bigbayboom.com.



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