



Warning: Hot Coffee!

Fire Threats from Sky Lanterns

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Learning Objective: The student will be able to identify the fire threat associated with sky lanterns.

The summer fire season is upon us, and the dangers of uncontrolled fires increase in the wildland urban interface and in neighborhoods where dry vegetation vulnerability is high.

While we commonly regulate outdoor fires, smoking and other ignition sources through the model fire codes, sky lanterns are another potential threat to cause unintended ignitions in these vegetated areas. While beautiful in flight — as shown on a variety of television advertisements — they create a threat since they contain uncontrolled fire sources left literally to the vagaries of wind and terrain.

Also known as kongming lanterns, wish lanterns, sky candles, or fire balloons, sky lanterns consist of a paper or fabric balloon that traps heated air produced by an open flame device, usually a candle. The open flame device often is connected to the balloon by a wire frame.

While these devices may not be specifically prohibited or allowed by the model fire codes, fire safety regulations do give the code official the authority to regulate open flames both indoors and outdoors. One code section, for example, specifically states “No person shall throw or place, or cause to be thrown or placed, a lighted match, cigar, cigarette, matches or other flaming or glowing substance or object on any surface or article where it can cause an unwanted fire.”¹

The code official also has the authority through the operational permitting process to regulate open flame devices. The code official can apply conditions to the permit, thereby controlling the release and recovery of these devices, as well as limit their use when environmental conditions make fires particularly liable. Such conditions might include:

- Launch sites that are minimum distances from combustible buildings or vegetation.
- Launch conditions that are limited by wind speed and direction that might minimize long-distance drift.
- Launch conditions that can occur only in periods of high humidity when the likelihood of igniting vegetation is less.
- Standby fire protection equipment such as portable fire extinguishers or garden hoses equipped with spray nozzles.

For additional information, consider enrolling in the National Fire Academy (NFA) course “Fire Inspection Principles” (R/N0220). Information and applications can be obtained at <http://apps.usfa.fema.gov/nfacourses/catalog/details/47>. The course is available at the NFA in Emmitsburg, Maryland, or through your state fire service training agency.

¹ International Fire Code®, (2012). Washington, DC: International Code Council.



Sky lanterns, while beautiful, create a fire threat where dry vegetation is a vulnerability.

