

In 1992 John Blogin, Sammy Lau, and I went out for dinner at a restaurant in Idaho. It was natural that the topic turned to fireworks and all the problems with government regulation that the industry was experiencing. Merchandise was being seized by Consumer Product Safety Commission, sometimes-whole containers, because the fuses burned faster than 3 seconds or slower than 6 seconds. A doctrine of “zero tolerance” was in practice that reasoned that if one item tested badly, the whole shipment was bad. Large multiple shot racks were under heavy attack. The Department of Transportation had developed a unique system of testing these racks in 4-foot cages with a roof on top and 4 to 6 inches of foam under the racks to see if they could get them to tip over and then ban them as a hazardous item. When the bounce, when fired from the foam didn't do the job, the rickachaying casings rebounding against the item at high velocity from the low roof often got the job done.

To make matters worse the testing was highly unscientific. One tester would light the fuse and when it lit he would holler “O.K.” to his assistant several feet away who would then start the stopwatch. A review of a very rare film of such testing came up with very different time results.

Items were sampled by CPSC off incoming containers and failed for various reasons. The importer could not challenge these test results. The rulings were absolute and the item was removed from the market. The entire shipment of that item was frozen by CPSC. The importer could not obtain samples and could not therefore secure a third party testing of the item. He or she was simply stuck.

In addition, a consecrated effort was being made to eliminate all multi-shot racks over 250 grams from the market, even though these racks were made up of individually approved single shots that fired on at a time in a series so that it was impossible for them to shoot any differently than the single shot items. Their stated purpose was to ban even these racks of 250 grams by proving them to be a hazard to public health.

Consumer Product Safety Commission, under the leadership of Anne Brown, had further stated their plan to move next to banning all multiple shots if possible and at least to regulated them to near non-existence. They also intended to ban bottle rockets. It truly looked grim for the fireworks industry in 1992 and it was clearly the topic over dinner that day. What could we do about it?

We decided a new strong organization was needed to address these problems. It needed to include all elements of the fireworks industry. Everyone would need to come together to solve these problems:

Importers - Both B and C

Manufacturers - Both B and C

Wholesalers - Both B and C

Retailers Both - B and C

Show Shooters – Both B and C

Hobbyists – Both B and C

Enthusiasts – Both B and C

We would all need to forget our differences and work together for the common good of all. But it had always been believed that such an awesome organization was not possible.

After a great deal of discussion I became persuaded by the other two that I needed to initiate such an organization, because if I didn't, it would never happen. In the fall of 1993 I issued a "Call to Arms" letter to several of my industry friends reviewing the problems and the need for a fighting organization and asking them to meet me in Kansas City in early September. Many of them did and the NFA was founded. An organization to represent everybody, big and small, B and C, that would address everybody and hopefully solve all the problems.

So what did this new organization do?

In the first years we held several meetings in Washington, DC and officers and members alike went up to Capitol Hill and lobbied both Senators & Representatives.

We filed a federal lawsuit against CPSC and petitioned all of the major fireworks organizations to support our cause both actively and financially.

And my lawyer and I requested and received a mediation hearing with DOT regarding large multiple shot racks.

So what happened?

In a meeting with CPSC our members Robert Kellner and Bobby Blake persuaded them to add another second to make fuse burn time 3-7 seconds instead of 3-6. This made it possible for factories to stay within the burn time limitations and ended most of seizures of merchandise due to this infraction.

The testing of multiple shot racks and shells in roofed cages on bouncy foam was replaced with an easy to comply with tilt test which removed the human element and kept safe items on the market.

Out of the judge's ruling in the lawsuit came the assurance that importers could pull samples of items from their shipment that CPSC sampled for testing, and that they could have these items tested by a third party accredited testing facility to verify or challenge the results. If the results of the 3rd party testing and the government testing were at odds with each other, the importer could receive a ruling from a federal law judge or a federal mediator.

The judge further questioned the policy of "zero tolerance" stating that it was hard to see how one bad apple meant that all the apples were bad, thus ending the seizure of whole containers over the finding of one violation.

A variance was acquired for racks over 250 grams if the individual shots were individually approved as Class C, fired in a sequence so no two could fire simultaneously, and each shot was encased in heavy cardboard and separated from one another so that multiple blow-outs could not occur. The original variance allowed for up to 16 shots and up to 720 grams. This exemption led to the later approval of 500 gram cakes without the need for variance. Not only had we saved the large 250 gram multiple shot racks, but we had legalized a whole new 500 gram division of fireworks and stopped the planned expansion of government to an attack on smaller racks and multiple shot cakes.

And our announcement of NFA determination to oppose the elimination of bottlerockets brought an end to the “ban the bottlerocket drive”.

In a concentrated and determined effort NFA accomplished a solution to all those problems it was organized to correct. Thanks to officers and members who donated hours of time, much traveling, and made large expenditures from their personal funds. Thanks to Pyrotechnicians International and the PGI who contributed large sums of money to the cause.

But the job is not over. Shipping problems exist for both 1.3G and 1.4G. Carriers are scarce. The major port out of China has closed. There is an attack on large Class B shells. Transportation costs are skyrocketing and on and on. A strong fighting organization is as essential as ever. There is much to do.

Let me conclude with a true story. Shortly after NFA filed its lawsuit against CPSC a large group of our members attended the annual gathering of the PGI. The officers of the PGI had graciously responded to our request by providing us with a meeting room and a non-competitive time in the convention busy schedule, so that the NFA could update the PGI members on the progress of the lawsuit and present a case for donations. At the end of the session of updating and question answering I went to the front to make an appeal for money. In the process of reviewing the many problems that had made the lawsuit necessary I brought up the effort being made by CPSC to ban bottlerockets. I once again reminisced about how much I had enjoyed bottlerockets when I was a kid and shot them with my Dad. I told them I was very worried that if the government was allowed to have its way my kid's kids might not only be deprived of all that joy, but might not even know what a bottlerocket was. I took a thousand dollars out of my pocket and put it in the pot on the table and asked everyone to put as much in that pot as they could afford so that we could keep that from happening.

From the very back of the room a little girl came up the aisle. Her hands were cupped together and they were full of change. She reached the front of the room and dumped all of the change into the pot. I learned later from her Dad, that it was money she had saved for some time so she would have money to spend at this very PGI convention. She had removed it from her piggy bank and brought it with her. She wanted to be able to shoot bottlerockets with her kids and their kids and their kids and so she put everything she had in the pot. She had faith that the NFA would save them from her.

Ladies & gentlemen, what an awesome responsibility we have to that little girl and to thousands of little boys and girls like her. These young children look to us to preserve for them those things that they cherish so dearly.

I want to welcome you and thank you for coming to our trade show and thereby supporting this endeavor. I want to welcome and thank those of you who have purchased memberships and especially those of you who have contributed time and efforts to help fulfill this awesome responsibility.

We must not fail.

Welcome and Thank You!

Cameron L. Starr