

Fireworks sales fall before Lunar New Year

People are buying fewer and smaller fireworks than usual for the upcoming Lunar New Year holiday in Beijing and Shanghai, where authorities have reduced the number of outlets allowed to sell fireworks.



A worker carries fireworks to put on display at a temporary sales outlet in Beijing's Chaoyang district on Monday. [Chen Xiaogen/for China Daily]

The capital approved just 511 stores for the holiday period, down from 719 last year, with none of them within the Third Ring Road. Sales licenses are valid from Jan 22 to Feb 1, according to the firework management office.

In Shanghai, which has a population of 24 million, just seven outlets have been given licenses – all of them in suburban districts – compared with 77 last year.

Traders have seen mixed fortunes in both cities in the first few days of sales.

"Sales are not going well, but we saw this coming so we decided not to stock too many," said a fireworks seller in Tiantongyuan, a populated residential area in Beijing, who gave his name only as Wang. "The price that distributors are charging has risen, so we have had to raise our prices, thus I don't expect trade to boom."

Panda Fireworks, the sole distributor to downtown Beijing this year, has predicted a 20 to 30 percent drop in sales, according to Beijing Daily. Yanlong Fireworks, another supplier, is only selling its leftover stock from last year in the capital's suburbs and has announced it is considering quitting the market.

By contrast, in Shanghai's suburbs, demand appears to remain high for some

vendors. The only trader in Qingpu district said he has almost sold all of his stock – 200 cases of fireworks.

However, in both cities, people are purchasing smaller, child-friendly fireworks as opposed to larger-scale, louder bangers traditionally associated with Spring Festival celebrations.

“Most customers are just buying sparklers,” said Tang Banghua, who runs a stall in the capital’s Chaoyang district, referring to handheld fireworks that emit a colorful flame as they burn. “They’re entertaining and cheap, priced at just 20 yuan (\$2.9) a pack.”

A woman in her 30s who visited the stall with her young son said: “I don’t want any myself, but my son insists. He likes the sparklers.

“It’s not convenient for us to set off big fireworks as we’re not allowed to do so until Lunar New Year’s Eve, and there are many restrictions on where you can use them. Also, the smoke they produce pollutes the air,” she added.

In addition to fewer licenses being made available, authorities have said that the sale of fireworks will be prohibited in the event of orange or red alerts for heavy air pollution.

“We’ll obey the policy, of course, but as traders, we just hope the weather stays clear,” Wang said.

Statistics from the Ministry of Environmental Protection showed the level of PM2.5 – fine particulate matter that is hazardous to health – rose from less than 100 micrograms per cubic meter to 700 on Lunar New Year’s Eve last year, when many people set off fireworks.

For centuries, Chinese have burned firecrackers and set off fireworks to drive away evil spirits, which eventually became a form of celebration.