

Hail cannon stirs complaints

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Lee Herring, manager of Southern Vermont Orchards in Bennington, stands in front of a "hail...



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BENNINGTON — Boom goes the hail cannon.

Once every six seconds to be exact — when there is a chance of hail high-up at Southern Vermont Orchards on Carpenter Hill Road.

Farmers across the country swear by the product as a way of protecting their apricots and peaches in California, their lettuce and spinach in Colorado and their apples here in Bennington.

"It's vital to our livelihood," said Lee Herring, manager of Southern Vermont Orchards.

The Hail Banger Cannon, designed and manufactured by Mike Eggers in New Zealand, ignites a charge of acetylene gas that creates a sonic boom meant to disrupt the formation of hail in a 125-acre zone. Scientists say the device is unproven; farmers admit this, but they are willing to try it to save their crop from devastating hail, which can destroy an entire crop overnight.

Herring said his orchard purchased the device for more than \$30,000 after it lost \$600,000 worth of apples during a hail storm last year. The device has worked since it was put into action at the beginning of May, he said, but it has also annoyed area residents in the process.

Herring activated it at 3:30 a.m. on Monday morning

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when thunderstorms and possible hail rolled through town. Later Monday morning, members of the Bennington Select Board, Town Clerk Tim Corcoran and Town Manager Stuart Hurd said they received numerous phone calls from residents complaining about the sleep-interrupting booms.

"It just echoes all throughout the community," Corcoran said Monday.

"There's no scientific evidence that this thing works, but there's evidence that it's disturbing," he added later at Monday's Select Board meeting.

Hurd said he received calls as far away as North Bennington and Middle Pownal Road. Corcoran said he has been fielding complaints for weeks.

The orchards' owner, Lia Diamond, who also owns the Apple Barn on Route 7, said she is not trying to create a nuisance. "We're just apple growers trying to produce a crop," she said, standing near the 20-foot high, cone-shaped device Monday.

She said it was only the second time the device has gone off during the night, and the hail season usually winds down after July. However, the Bennington Police Department is expected to test noise levels today to make sure the device is not breaking the town's noise ordinance, according to Hurd. If it is, it will need to be shut down, he said.

The noise ordinance prohibits sounds louder than 60 decibels at a property line in a residential zone during the day and 45 decibels at night or after 10 p.m., Hurd said. Because the device is certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, it falls outside the enforcement of town's land use ordinance, but it is still governed by the noise ordinance, he said.

Herring said the device registers at 80 decibels at his mail box, which is about 200 meters away from the device. A freight train and a garbage disposal register at about this level from 15 meters away. Herring said the device has not registered on a noise meter when he has tested it in downtown Bennington.

He watches the weather from a radar in his house on Carpenter Hill Road and activates the device 15 minutes before hail is likely to hit.

Once the danger passes, he turns it off. It usually runs for 30 to 90 minutes, he said. It has been going off a few times a week.

There have been 12 hail storms this year, compared to six all of last year, according to Herring. He said farms in western New York have been hit hard by hail this year and some have lost their entire crop.

Herring said the device is environmentally safe and creates no pollution.

Residents have raised concerns to Hurd that it will kill or stun birds and bats.

"In a sense it's a weapon," Hurd said about the concerns at the Select Board meeting. "It shoots a sonic boom 1,500 feet in the air."

At the meeting, Corcoran said it needs to stop.

"This just really can't continue," he said. "One way or another it's got to end. If somebody had a boombox going the police would go and shut it off."