

DJ Sony, Imax, Others Forming Lobby Group For Laser Projection Systems

By Andy Georgiades
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Cinema companies, including Imax Corp. (IMAX) and Sony Corp. (SNE), are creating an industry group to ease the regulatory climate facing next-generation projection systems that are based on laser-light sources.

Laser is the latest digital-cinema buzzword, offering the industry several advantages over traditional bulb technology, including higher light output -- a critical element for 3D and large-format projection. Imax was the first to bet on lasers and is currently finalizing an equity investment in start-up Laser Light Engines to co-develop a laser-based system that could illuminate its largest screens and retrofit its existing network. Other movie-projector manufacturers are expected to shift to lasers as well if lab tests prove out in the real world.

However, lasers add a regulatory wrinkle that the new organization - the Laser Illuminated Projection Association, or LIPA - will try to iron out. Light shows and other displays that use lasers are regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Devices and Radiological Health, which is in charge of ensuring laser equipment safety.

When handled "improperly," lasers can cause eye injury, skin burns and fire, and can distract pilots and drivers. "While the lasers themselves can cause injuries, laser light shows that are produced in accordance with FDA regulations keep hazardous lasers away from the audience," FDA says.

Both the manufacturers of lasers and the operators of laser-light equipment require variances from the FDA, which can take several months to get approved.

Bill Beck is co-founder of Laser Light Engines and, along with the likes of Imax, Sony Corp. (SNE) and other cinema-industry players, is a driving force behind LIPA's creation. "What we're doing is not a laser-light show even though it's technically classified as a laser-light show," Beck told Dow Jones. "Our approach was to develop a new category called laser-illuminated projection...where the science and the application are completely different than if you're just aiming a laser beam out into a crowd at a rock concert."

Beck acknowledges that high-power lasers need regulating, but the fact is xenon lamps can be dangerous too. "Whether powered by lasers or xenon lamps, appropriate safety interlocks are required."

Peter Lude, senior vice-president of solutions engineering at Sony, said the

company's been studying various laser technologies for a couple of years, and while it hasn't committed to making a laser-illuminated projector yet, "we think it's more a matter of 'when' than a matter of 'if.'"

He said the current regulations aren't inappropriate for what they were originally intended, but didn't anticipate the application Sony and others have in mind now. "It's really no longer laser light coming out of the projector system."

The goal of the group is to find a balance between keeping the public safe with rules that aren't much more burdensome than those already in place to protect consumers in today's movie houses.

An FDA official said the agency is aware of developments in laser-projection cinema systems and that it's in discussions with the industry trade group and "taking its input into account as we consider various options."

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Company Web Sites: <http://www.laserlightengines.com>, www.sony.com,
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