

David Pellitteri: Safely managing the disposal of rechargeable batteries: A call for public awareness and policy action

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When rechargeable (lithium) batteries are disposed of in the trash or recycling, they pose a significant risk to combust and cause fires. In the past eight months, two Southern Wisconsin recycling facilities have experienced catastrophic damage from fires that are believed to have begun by rechargeable batteries — [Columbia County Recycling and Solid Waste](#) facility in Portage and a [City of Milwaukee recycling facility](#). A third recycling facility fire at [John's Disposal in Whitewater](#) may have also been caused by a rechargeable battery. Recycling Centers are particularly sensitive to fires because of the amount of paper and cardboard being recycled.

Rechargeable batteries have gained widespread popularity because they are compact, lightweight, and have high energy storage capacity, making them indispensable to our modern, on-the-go lifestyles. From cell phones, tablets, and laptops to power tools, scooters, and electric cars, rechargeable batteries power our world. As rechargeable and other, newer battery technologies become abundant in our daily lives, it is crucial to address the hazards associated with their disposal.

In writing this, I hope that we can get the word out to everyone that rechargeable batteries, and products that contain these batteries, cannot go in the trash or recycling without creating a major risk to waste handling facilities. In Wisconsin, we are fortunate to have a robust waste and recycling system infrastructure composed of recycling centers, transfer stations and landfills that keep waste contained and out of the public realm. As rechargeable and other battery technologies have become more prevalent, so have battery-related fires within these facilities. Each one of these fires has the potential to not just knock out local infrastructure, but also to threaten the lives of workers.

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The number of fires will continue to grow if these batteries are disposed of by traditional methods. Recycling facilities are complex operations, with high-tech sorting technologies. When a recycling facility has a catastrophic fire, it could take a year or more before it can be rebuilt and come back online. Landfill fires burn not just above ground, but they can get beneath the surface making them difficult to contain. These underground fires can burn for weeks until they are fully extinguished.

We are just starting to see the effects of these battery technologies on the waste and recycling infrastructure. We need to stop disposing of batteries by normal waste and recycling methods. Battery manufacturers, retailers, politicians, and government agencies need to work quickly to create a safe and easily accessible infrastructure for battery disposal. Broader public policy and education efforts are needed now. Planning and action should be taken to encourage lawmakers to provide more concrete guidelines and options for more accessible methods to recycle and dispose of these materials.

We have working models in place with other waste products that we can adapt for batteries. For example, Wisconsin has a robust electronics takeback and recycling program supported financially by the manufacturers and sellers of electronics. Batteries could be added to this program, or we could mimic the electronics program with a separate infrastructure specifically for batteries. There is also an option for deposits on batteries so consumers would have financial incentives to take them to drop-off sites. There are other states using different methods that might work as well. There are answers and solutions available. Please call your State of Wisconsin representatives and tell them there is a problem and that you support legislation that will help keep our recycling centers, waste infrastructure system and the people working in these facilities safe.

In the meantime, we ask all Wisconsinites, please do NOT put rechargeable batteries in your trash or recycling containers. If you need to charge it...it has a battery. Don't throw it out. Check with your municipality, county, or Call2recycle.org for a nearby drop-off site.

-Pellitteri is vice president, Pellitteri Waste Systems Inc.. He serves as chair for the Wisconsin Chapter of the National Waste and Recycling Association and is an appointee on the Governor's Council on Recycling.

Resource Links

- Wisconsin DNR: [Prevent Recycling Fires By Safely Disposing Of Used Batteries](#)
- Wisconsin DNR: [Household Battery Recycling](#)
- City of Madison: [Household Batteries - Recycling](#)
- NBC15.com: [Madison Fire pushing to educate people on lithium-ion battery safety](#)
- Earth 911: [Lithium-ion Batteries near 53713](#)
- Dane County Clean Sweep [drop-off site](#)
- The National Law Review: [EPA Classifies Lithium Ion EV Batteries Hazardous Waste](#)
- Safety Announcement from Pellitteri Waste Systems: [Fire Hazards](#)
- John's Disposal: [Example of a battery fire](#)
- Pellitteri Waste Systems: [Watch Your Recycling Get Sorted in this 7-minute video](#)