Stopping battery explosions and keeping recycling rates low is easy, as long as residents dispose of their batteries in a clear plastic zip-top bag or one provided by their hauler, as demonstrated by Doug Button.
PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.

Prices on the Rise

Why ratepayers may see price hikes if batteries aren't recycled properly

BY MATT JOCKS

Flames, smoke and charred equipment are the most obvious signs of a fire started by a battery that hasn't been recycled properly, but there are other costs from these fires — costs which run even deeper and can affect haulers even when there is no fire.

Insurance companies are starting to view recycling and trash facilities as too high risk to insure and too low a return on investment due to the high price tag that comes after each facility fire. All facilities, regardless of whether or not they've had a fire at their location, are facing potential insurance rate hikes and possible loss of insurance altogether. Considering each battery in a home or electronic device can easily explode or start a fire if placed loosely into a trash or recycling cart, this issue is creating a lot of difficulties for facilities to ensure they're safely covered in the event of loss.

Doug Kobold, Executive Director of the California Product Stewardship Council, pinpointed the destructive fire at the RethinkWaste-owned Shoreway Environmental Center in 2016 as the first "shock to the system."

"That was the biggest, but these fires have been numerous," he said.

Likely started by a lithium-ion battery, the Shoreway fire alone cost $8.5 million in damages.

"RethinkWaste had to work really hard to maintain their insurance," Kobold said. "If a facility loses their insurance and can't self-insure, they may decide it's in their best interest to shut the facility down. Then you have to find some other place for that waste to go."

In fact, many facilities are finding the risk of a battery fire can be just as costly as the fire itself.

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>
> **Doug Button**
> President, South San Francisco Scavenger and Blue Line Transfer Inc.

To maintain insurance and keep plants from closing down, Doug Button, President of the South San Francisco Scavenger Company and Blue Line Transfer, Inc., said facilities have been making costly upgrades to their operations.

"If something catches fire, you're looking at losing an entire facility," he said.

Potential upgrades range from simple solutions like improved sprinkler systems, to more expensive measures such as robotics that use infrared sensors and chemical dispersion to stop fires. The more high-tech solutions can be very costly to implement.

However, batteries can harm the recycling process even if they don't explode on the sort line or in a collection truck. That's because too many loose batteries mixed in with actual recyclable materials can cause potential buyers to turn down entire loads of recyclables for being contaminated with too many non-recyclable items. As international buyers become more stringent with the quality of materials they will accept, the industry is now struggling with a growing amount of lost sales due to these contaminated loads of recyclables.

For now, the industry has been absorbing most of these costs from lost recycling sales and facility fires. However, unless behaviors change, these costs will eventually be felt by ratepayers.

"We're hoping that a significant fee hike for consumers isn't the case, but obviously we have to protect our infrastructure," Button said.

TOXIC RISK

Batteries that are recycled incorrectly aren't just a hazard to workers, they are also poisonous to our water and soil. Here's why keeping batteries out of landfills is critical to protecting our environment:

Batteries can contain toxic metals such as **lead, cadmium and mercury.**

When landfilled or forced through the standard waste stream, batteries can release these toxins into the **soil, groundwater, surface water or air.**

These toxins can become infused in fruits, vegetables and grass can and **passed onto humans** through the food chain, creating health problems.

Putting unnecessary items into landfills also creates more methane gas, which speeds up **global warming.**