

January 30, 2024

Chairman Oldenburg and Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Environment;

The Wisconsin Chapter of the National Solid Waste & Recycling Association submits the following testimony urging your support of AB 987 and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today on this major issue facing our industry.

Rechargeable batteries, especially lithium-ion batteries, have become increasingly popular in everyday consumer products because of their light weight, small size, and high energy density. While a convenient energy source, there are significant hazards associated with rechargeable batteries. From collection to receipt and processing at a solid waste or materials recovery facility, rechargeable batteries experience the physical abuse of loading, compacting, unloading, sorting, baling, stacking, crushing, and densification. This abuse can damage the battery, often leading to thermal runaway. Even “dead” batteries can experience thermal runaway. Thermal runaway is a chain reaction of the battery chemicals that produces more heat resulting in more reaction, creating even more heat. This can occur incredibly fast, within milliseconds. As a result, the batteries can explode and start fires, igniting both the battery and any flammable materials nearby. Solid waste and materials recovery facilities contain an abundance of flammable material, such as paper and plastics. Between the potential damage to these lithium batteries and the presence of paper and plastic, lithium battery fires at solid waste and material recovery facilities can be severe and present long-lasting implications for essential public services.

My family’s company, Pellitteri Waste Systems, operates both a solid waste transfer station and a material recovery (recycling) facility right here in Dane County. In 2023 we averaged a thermal event and/or fire every other week, with summer seeing at least one fire a week. One example involved a truckload of recyclables that had just been dumped inside our recycling facility for sorting. Our employee pushed the load into a pile and was working on another task. In less than four minutes the pile erupted into flames. Surrounded by paper and plastics it only took seconds for the fire to grow to the size of a large bonfire. Our employee utilized the ten -yard grapple bucket on the loader he was operating to take a big scoop of the burning material and relocated it outside, drastically reducing the size of the fire and allowing other employees to safely contain it. We were blessed that the thermal event occurred in an easily accessible location, and if not for the quick thinking of our loader operator I hate to think what serious injury, or worse, could have happened to our other employees in the facility. Not to mention his quick actions likely prevented the destruction of millions of dollars in sorting equipment and technologies contained in our recycling facility. But this is not the end of the story.... After containing the fire inside our facility, we proceeded outside to contain it. We doused the pile with water and were able to locate the burning battery. After separating it from the recyclables surrounding it, we could not get it to stop burning! It continued to have thermal events for hours. Once the battery finally ceased burning it was determined to be a rechargeable battery contained inside of a remote-control truck made for children.

As this story affirms, lithium-ion batteries are not recyclable products like paper, aluminum and other basic household products and should never be placed into residential or commercial trash or recycling streams. Rather, they should be taken to household hazardous waste collection points or other collection sites. However, there are not nearly enough of these collection sites in the state. AB 987 will help increase the number of collection sites in Wisconsin and provide funding to help assure proper disposal.

There is a significant lack of public education on the potential dangers created by throwing rechargeable batteries into the trash or recycling bin. A concerted and coordinated effort of all stakeholders is needed to better educate the public on these dangers and inform them of proper disposal options. AB 987 will help increase public awareness on proper disposal of rechargeable batteries.

Finally, to help alleviate the real and ever-present risks posed to our workers' safety and damage to our facilities, it is imperative that modernized fire detection and suppression systems be installed. Both public and private waste & recycling facilities are not designed or equipped to handle this type of risk. The expense involved in installing fire prevention/suppression measures for our members is not one that can be absorbed as a cost of business because our contracts with local municipalities often involve setting costs for service on a multi-year basis. Utilizing surplus funds from the Environmental Fund to help subsidize the costs for installation of these important safeguards is good for public facilities, good for our members, keeps costs down for the taxpayer, and reduces the potential of interruption to waste and recycling pick-up services.

AB 987 is a vital first step in beginning the process of educating the public on the dangers involved in disposal of rechargeable batteries into the garbage can and recycling bins; providing more collection sites; and assuring our facilities, but most importantly, our employees, are better protected from fires that erupt when these batteries end up in the waste & recycling streams.

On behalf of the Wisconsin Chapter of the National Solid Waste & Recycling Association, I respectfully ask your support of AB 987.

Thank you,

David Pellitteri

Chairman-National Waste & Recycling Association-WI Chapter