



Prevent Recycling Fires By Safely Disposing Of Used Batteries

A punctured or bent lithium-ion battery can produce enough heat to melt or ignite materials near the battery, even if the battery itself does not ignite. Photo credit: Outagamie County Recycling and Solid Waste

MADISON, Wis. – The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) reminds the public of the dangers of throwing rechargeable batteries, electronics and other materials that could cause a fire in trash or recycling bins.

In the last month, there have been large, damaging fires at multiple Wisconsin recycling facilities. While it is hard to pinpoint the exact cause of each fire, many batteries, especially powerful lithium-ion batteries found in many electronics, can cause fires when not disposed of properly. These batteries hold a considerable charge even when they no longer provide enough energy to power the device, and when damaged, they can spark or heat up and cause a fire.

“It only takes one lithium-ion battery to cause a huge fire and put workers and fire crews at risk,” said Sarah Murray, DNR E-Cycle Wisconsin coordinator. “Recycling facilities that handle cans, bottles and paper are not designed to handle batteries and electronics. Paper, cardboard and other material can easily catch fire with a spark from a damaged battery or rechargeable device.”

If not caught early, these fires can quickly spread and injure workers or firefighters, cause major damage to equipment, or even destroy an entire facility. In the past month, fires have caused severe damage at recycling and solid waste facilities in Columbia County and Milwaukee.

“When you put electronics or rechargeable batteries in your recycling or trash container, you’re putting workers and facilities at risk,” said Greg Kaminski, Columbia County solid waste director. “Taking batteries and electronics to a drop-off site may be an extra step, but it’s really important.”

Some batteries, such as single-use alkaline batteries, are safe to put in the trash. But it’s important to understand your batteries and how to store and dispose of them.

“With so many devices in our homes powered by so many different shapes and types of batteries, we know it can be confusing,” Murray said. “We want to help everyone understand how to identify their batteries and where you can recycle batteries and electronics.”

The DNR encourages everyone to follow these tips:

- Be aware that some batteries and battery-powered devices can pose significant hazards if damaged or tossed in the trash. Learn about the different types of batteries you have and how to manage them. The DNR has a household battery recycling guide to help.
- Take used, rechargeable batteries to local collection sites. Check with battery retailers about their recycling programs or search for nearby sites through battery recycling organization Call2Recycle’s [website](#) or by calling 1-877-2-RECYCLE.

- Recycle old electronics through E-Cycle Wisconsin. Many small electronics can be recycled for free or traded in for credit or cash. Visit the DNR's [list of collection sites and free mail-back programs](#).
- Don't put electronics or rechargeable batteries in trash or recycling containers. Most electronics are banned from landfills and incinerators, and they cannot be recycled at the same facilities that recycle plastics, glass and paper.
- When storing batteries for recycling, tape the terminals or put each battery in an individual plastic bag, which prevents batteries from accidentally sparking if terminals touch.
- Store damaged (swollen, bent, punctured or crushed) batteries or devices in sand or kitty litter and, if possible, contact the manufacturer or Call2Recycle for instructions.
- Do not try to remove non-removable batteries from devices, as this could damage the battery and cause a fire.

Note that businesses and institutions have special requirements to determine which types of batteries they have and manage batteries according to hazardous waste regulations.

For more information, refer to the DNR webpage on [properly handling used batteries](#).