

Call for Action and Coordination on Product Safety

We call on manufacturers and policy makers to prioritize safety in the design, production, labeling, marketing, and management of end-of-life consumer products with high fire or explosion risks. Ensuring public safety and the long-term viability of waste and resource management infrastructure requires immediate urgent action. Products at risk of ignition or explosion include those containing lithium-ion batteries, compressed gas cylinders, marine and road flares, ammunition, fireworks, and similar products. Fires caused by these products have become increasingly common in collection vehicles, and at recycling facilities, landfills, transfer stations, and other facilities. These items pose a serious safety threat to the waste and resource management industry, as well as the public. The increasing risks associated with these materials and products are becoming unsustainable.

Have you ever considered how many devices containing lithium-ion batteries are in your home? Lithium-ion batteries power many common items – laptops, cell phones, tablets, wireless headphones, smartwatches, e-readers, portable speakers, vaping devices, portable power banks, power tools, gaming controllers, thermostats, electric toothbrushes, electric scooters, and many other household items. These items need special end of life collection and management. In addition, marine and road flares, compressed gas cylinders, and other items with explosive characteristics require special end of life management but there are limited options for consumers to bring these items for proper disposal.

While these products have become ubiquitous in everyday life, they have not been accompanied by plans for clear labeling, consumer education on safe handling and management, nor a well-planned strategy for product end of life (EOL). When these products improperly find their way into household trash and recycling bins, they frequently become damaged and start fires and explosions in collection vehicles, transfer stations, materials recovery facilities (MRFs), landfills, and waste-to-energy facilities.

Threats to essential workers in the waste and resource management industries will continue to increase as more potentially dangerous products are marketed without the necessary communication and planning regarding product EOL. Policy makers and manufacturers must take urgent action to develop plans for product EOL. Employees in the vital recycling and waste industries are entitled to a safe working environment.

Both public and private sector operators share a widespread and growing concern about the rising cost of insurance, and the risk of becoming uninsurable due to fire and safety risks. Costly property damage to recycling and waste facilities and more-costly and less-available insurance due to rising fire risks threaten to make it economically infeasible for continued recycling and waste operations. Operations that have sustained damage are often forced to close for extended periods of time, or close permanently, affecting essential local recycling and waste services on which the public depends, including those employed in these industries. As stewards of public health and the environment, we take these issues very seriously. A significant consequence is the limited availability of recycled materials needed by manufacturers – raising significant concerns at a time where we are looking to bolster domestic manufacturing.

THIS SITUATION IS INCREDIBLY URGENT, REQUIRING IMMEDIATE ACTION. We are speaking up for the safety of essential workers and consumers. Together, we encourage brands and policy makers to take prompt and effective action in order to prevent the rise in fires through the following steps:

- Design products with recyclability, and with batteries that may be safely removed from products for proper EOL management.
- Label products clearly with their hazards, including whether they contain a battery or are explosive.
- Provide clear and proper disposal or recycling instructions to prevent improper disposal in household waste or commingled recycling and ensure that a convenient and free EOL management option is available.
- Establish and sustain collection, recycling, and/or disposal systems funding to manage these hazardous products properly.
- Cease adding new products to the market that pose a danger of fire or explosion if they do not have an effective and sustainable EOL plan that has been developed in coordination with those handling such products at EOL.

We encourage all stakeholders to take this issue very seriously and consider taking steps to safely handle potentially dangerous products. We have developed many resources on education and outreach about proper battery recycling and recognize the need for an international, coordinated campaign on safe and effective recycling and disposal.

In closing, we invite manufacturers and policy makers to join us as we start conversations on how to promptly resolve these challenges. We appreciate the demand for these products, however, they must also be designed and manufactured for safe handling by our industry, and the EOL systems must have adequate funding and be convenient for public use.

We must do better. Together, we can solve this. Join us to be part of the solution.