

Opinion: California goal to keep batteries out of landfills needs a recharge

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Discarded batteries await sorting at the Marin Resource Recovery Center in San Rafael, Calif. on Thursday, May 17, 2018. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

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We all know we're not supposed to throw rechargeable devices such as electric toothbrushes, smartwatches, wireless earbuds, power tools and cell phones into the trash, but many of us do. Proper disposal of these devices and their lithium ion batteries is often unclear, inconvenient, expensive or unavailable where we live and work. So into the trash they go, with catastrophic consequences.

Consumers clearly need help properly disposing of expended batteries and products. That's why, working with a broad coalition, we've proposed the Responsible Battery Recycling Act (Senate Bill 1215 and Assembly Bill 2440).

This measure would create a collection-and-recycling program in which consumers can dispose of small household batteries and battery-embedded products at free collection sites. The legislation would require companies that manufacture lithium-ion batteries and battery-

embedded products sold in California to develop, finance and implement this program in collaboration with CalRecycle, the state office that oversees waste management, recycling and waste reduction programs.

When we add old batteries and products embedded with lithium-ion batteries to landfills, they can leach toxic, corrosive chemicals such as mercury, cadmium, lead and nickel into the soil and water table, which endangers the environment and human health. These chemicals are extremely difficult and expensive to clean up.



Improperly discarded batteries can also cause destructive fires.

In 2018, a California Product Stewardship Council survey found that lithium-ion batteries had caused nearly 40% of fires at waste facilities over the previous two years. This issue gained added attention when, in 2016, a lithium-ion battery ignited a fire inside a waste recovery facility in San Carlos, resulting in nearly \$8.5 million in damages, a three-month facility closure with over 50 employees furloughed, and a six-fold increase in insurance premium costs. Fortunately, no one was injured in the blaze, but fires in such facilities risk employees' and firefighters' health and safety due to the combination of high heat and toxic fuel sources.

The Legislature recognized this problem years ago. In 2005, California banned lithium-ion batteries from the regular trash stream while requiring some retailers to provide a battery-return option. It was a good start: In 2020, more than 400,000 pounds of lithium-ion batteries were reported collected. That, unfortunately, is a fraction of those discarded. Resource Recycling Systems estimates that 75% to 92% of expended lithium-ion batteries are discarded improperly.

Most of us have a bag of used batteries in our junk drawer that we swear we'll properly discard at some point. But we lack a straightforward, simple disposal option. We won't be able to reduce the risk of waste facility fires or leaching chemicals until we create a system that's easy for consumers.

California already successfully employs this model, called extended producer responsibility, to properly dispose of and recycle a variety of consumer products made with hazardous or toxic materials, including carpeting, paint, mattresses, pharmaceuticals and medical needles. In recent years, these consumer-friendly programs have cut millions of dollars in costs for local governments while preventing these household hazardous waste products from ending up in landfills.

It's no wonder that the Statewide Commission on Recycling Markets & Curbside Recycling strongly recommends including lithium-ion batteries and battery-embedded products in such a program. In March 2021, the District of Columbia's all-battery bill officially passed into law, making it the first all-battery producer responsibility law in the country.

It's high time to make sensible changes to end dangerous, expensive waste facility fires and prevent contamination of our food and water supplies. It's definitely past time to make discarding old rechargeable electronics easy and free for all Californians.

State Sen. Josh Newman, D-Fullerton, and Assemblywoman Jacqui Irwin, D-Thousand Oaks, wrote this commentary for CalMatters.