

The hidden danger of throwing batteries in your bin

National Recycling Week 10-16 November 2025

As we head into National Recycling Week 2025 and congratulate South Australians on achieving the highest recycling rates in the country (yet again!), let's not forget that fires caused by batteries could bring the whole thing undone in an instant.

"Batteries pose the single biggest threat to our industry," said Leah Maxwell, CEO of the Central Adelaide Waste and Recycling Authority.

"Incorrectly disposed batteries cause 10-12,000 fires a year across Australia in the waste and recycling sector. And I wouldn't be surprised if that is an under-estimate," she said.

Fires caused by lithium-ion batteries have destroyed whole recycling facilities overnight, not only in Australia but all over the world. Staff in recycling facilities are trained to spot and fight battery fires, but the danger is ever-present.

"When batteries are placed in kerbside bins, they get emptied into compactor trucks where they can be damaged and start fires either within the truck itself, or when the material is dropped off at recycling facilities like ours at Kilburn," she said.

"While an old battery may seem 'flat' to you, it still contains a residual charge. When that battery is damaged inside a waste collection truck, that stored energy can instantaneously start a large fire that is very hard to put out."

"The problem is getting rapidly worse as the community's reliance on lithium-ion batteries increases and they are in every home and every shed," said Ms Maxwell.

Daily danger to waste and recycling truck drivers

"Waste and recycling truck drivers deal with the risk of battery fires every day," said Ms Maxwell.

"They are trained on what to do when a fire starts in their truck, as they pick up household bins. So far there have not been any major injuries or fatalities here in South Australia."

"Our fear is that a driver could one day be hurt or killed if people don't do the right thing and dispose of their batteries at safe drop-off locations."

Embedded batteries – hidden inside rechargeable appliances

It's not just the batteries you can take out and hold in your hand.

"Lithium-ion batteries are often embedded inside an appliance where you can't see them. But if you can plug something in and recharge it, it definitely has a battery inside."

That includes everything from your power tools, vacuum cleaners, toys, toothbrushes, phones, laptops, tablets, digital cameras, baby monitors and electric bicycles and e-scooters.

"They're also in vapes and e-cigarettes," she said, "which people throw away in large numbers."

Deaths interstate due to battery fires

"There have already been a few fatalities interstate, when batteries in e-mobility devices caught fire as they charged overnight in people's homes," said Ms Maxwell.

"The Government of New South Wales stepped in with some urgent new laws to force companies that sell batteries into the market to take responsibility for their safe disposal."

"We desperately need those same laws introduced here in South Australia," she said.

Safe places to dispose of loose handheld and embedded batteries – FREE OF CHARGE

There are over 400 safe locations across SA to safely drop off loose handheld batteries through the industry funded B-Cycle program – including most major supermarkets and hardware stores.

A full list of B-Cycle drop-off locations is online here: www.bcycle.com.au/drop-off

The South Australian Government is also expected to shortly announce a number of safe, free recycling locations for used rechargeable items and all embedded battery products (which have batteries inside).

"It's such a simple and easy way for our residents to do the right thing," said Ms Maxwell. "We need everyone to grab their used batteries and rechargeables and drop them off safely at these sites."

"It's so easy to do and won't cost you a cent."

"You'll be doing your bit to protect waste sector workers and keep recycling services up and running."

MEDIA RELEASE

Leah Maxwell is available for interviews regarding recycling of batteries and the dangers incorrect disposal can cause.

For more information, please contact the relevant contact below:

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