

Workers like Teresa Montgomery's crew at Blue Line Transfer Inc. in South San Francisco are at risk when batteries end up loose in a recycling or trash cart. That's why residents should use a clear plastic zip-top bag, or one given to them by their recycling hauler, to collect their batteries.

PHOTO BY GEORGE E. BAKER JR.

Why Batteries are Dangerous

Proper recycling protects recycling workers and the environment

BY MATT JOCKS

Someone would never drop a lit match inside their trash or recycling cart when taking them to the curb each week for collection. However, that is exactly what many San Mateo County residents may unknowingly be doing when they toss loose batteries into their trash or recycling cart alongside other items. This is why it's important to properly recycle batteries, by collecting them in a clear plastic zip-top bag and placing that bag on top of the correct curbside cart for collection.

Batteries power most of the items that keep us moving and connected, becoming smaller and more powerful with each new device that's released. Batteries are bought and replaced all the time, but if residents carelessly place their old batteries or items with batteries inside them, inside one of the curbside carts, those batteries become a fire hazard that poses a major physical and financial threat.

That threat became reality for many local workers in 2016, when a fire at the Shoreway Environmental Center in San Carlos caused \$8.5 million in damages. The culprit? A lithium-ion battery that was placed inside a curbside cart. Though it may have been the largest recycling fire in California, it's not the only one.

"Lithium-ion batteries, including the small button variety, are the most problematic," said Doug Button, President of the South San Francisco Scavenger Company and Blue Line Transfer, Inc. "They're small, but can generate a lot of heat if they have any remaining charge and their terminals aren't taped."

Those batteries become combustible when they come into contact with one another in recycling or collection trucks. They become even more of a hazard if the batteries make it to any recycling or trash processing facilities, where the pressure of sorting belts and equipment can ignite them as this machinery was not made to process batteries.

So far, battery fires have only done significant damage to equipment, but those in the industry are always worried a fire will go one step further.

"I dread to think about a worker losing their life," said Teresa Montgomery, Sustainability Manager at the Blue Line Transfer Inc. "We can fix or replace a truck or equipment. You can't replace a life."

The costs created by battery fires — in damages, stopped facility processing lines, and increased spending on insurance and infrastructure — come at a time when prices for recyclables have already dropped. Those economic pressures will eventually be felt by

jurisdictions and ratepayers if proper recycling methods don't improve.

Thankfully, proper battery recycling is easy throughout San Mateo County: Safely collect your batteries, tape the terminals, secure in a clear zip-top bag and place on TOP of the right curbside cart on collection day.

"If residents help by properly recycling batteries, we'll be in good shape," said Button.

"WE CAN FIX OR REPLACE A TRUCK ... YOU CAN'T REPLACE A LIFE."

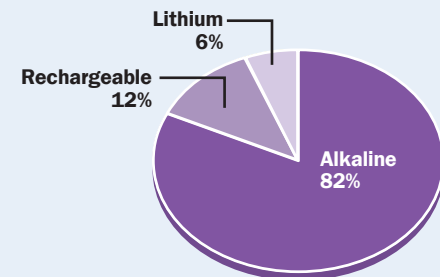
Teresa Montgomery
Sustainability Manager, Blue Line Transfer Inc.



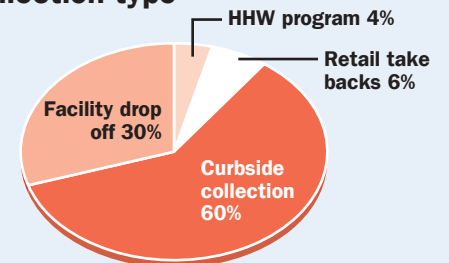
BATTERIES: BY THE NUMBERS

240,000 pounds of batteries were collected in San Mateo County in 2018 through the County's Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) Program, RethinkWaste, GreenWaste and South San Francisco Scavenger (SSFS) alone. Here's how those numbers break down:

By battery type



By collection type



All data is based on partial collections of four haulers and collectors in San Mateo County, and their projections for total collection numbers in 2018.