

The National Recycling Coalition (NRC) is advising increased vigilance in defense of **reuse, recycling and composting as essential services**, in the face of current threats to programs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. NRC’s mission, since 1978, is to support a prosperous and productive American recycling system that contributes to a sustainable environmental, energy, and economic future.

The safety of workers in recycling facilities and on collection routes has always been of utmost importance. NRC members report that the vast majority of established, responsible reuse, recycling and composting operations have been providing extensive and necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) to employees for many years prior to the 2020 outbreak, as the potential for exposure to infectious diseases while handling residential and commercial discards is always present.

Many programs have continued to operate during the crisis, with state leadership in New York, Colorado, Iowa and elsewhere providing clear and needed direction that reuse, recycling and composting are essential services. But Michigan colleagues report that the initial guidelines provided by the nation’s risk advisor, *Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)*, do not directly identify reuse, recycling and organics management as essential, resulting in confusion over their interpretation and liability concerns—thus, with a specific call-out, the default has disappointingly shifted to disposal.

Judith Enck, President of *Beyond Plastics* at Bennington College (VT) and former EPA Regional Administrator, sounded an alarm to NRC this month because the Vermont legislature was considering a bill to allow the landfilling of source-separated recyclables due to COVID-19 concerns. (The bill did not move out of committee and Vermont haulers are still collecting recyclables, which are banned from disposal, but enforcement discretion On March 26th, Maine Governor Janet Mills signed an Executive Order which allows municipalities to count incinerated waste toward their annual recycling goals until January 2021. Tennessee, Alabama, California, Washington State, Ohio and New Jersey and other states are all reportedly curtailing at least some recycling programs to cope with the pandemic.

Addressing challenges related to a reduced and compromised hauling industry workforce, and possible shortfalls in PPE due to hospital demands, is necessary, but concerns are prevalent among Coalition members that even temporary service disruptions will lead to contract disputes and interest in dismantling reuse, recycling and composting programs permanently, rather than overcoming actual challenges to enable continued material recovery for productive use. Manufacturing facilities that produce vital recycled-content goods for consumers and businesses, including now-precious toilet paper and shipping boxes, rely on continued flow of recyclables from both residential and business recycling programs.

“Unnecessary disposal creates negative implications for human health, the environment and the economy,” Mark Lichtenstein, Chief Sustainability Officer at State University of New York, cautions. Industry leaders also fear the daunting challenges, post-crisis, to revive virus-stalled recycling programs.

Reuse, recycling and composting programs are the quickest, most effective ways that communities can address climate change, which continues to be an existential threat as large as COVID-19. Recycling creates ten times as many jobs as burning or burying discarded materials, so maintaining those operations is critical as the unemployment rate soars. It is imperative that even in a crisis as serious as COVID-19, responsible materials management to conserve resources and protect human health should continue to receive priority.

The **Health Care Waste Institute** of the **National Waste & Recycling Association** has posted [Frequently Asked Questions](#) to protect worker safety due to COVID-19. To address COVID-19 health care waste, **Health Care Without Harm** is inviting the public to join the webinar [Do No Harm in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic](#). **The Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)** is compiling information about the impacts of COVID-19 on Zero Waste initiatives around the U.S., and safety issues that need to be addressed to develop responsive and preventive strategies for the long term which do not result in unnecessary disposal or incineration.

Kerrin O'Brien, Director of Michigan Recycling Coalition, shares this advice for worried fellow recyclers: "Reaffirm for your audience the value of recycling organic and inorganic materials. If services are temporarily disrupted, ask your clients and residents to hold on to their recovered materials until services resume. Their materials and your programs are part of a larger supply chain, providing feedstock for a significant number of businesses and organizations large and small, and their livelihoods depend on it."

Please visit the [NRC website](#) for additional resources and recommendations.

On April 30 at 12:00 PM EDT, the NRC, EPA and Renew Plastics is co-hosting a free, interactive webinar, [Recycling Markets Outlook Forum](#). Registration is open to the public, including businesses, local governments and recycling industry representatives who seek to gain insights into the recycling value chain for all commodities, and how the industry is working through barriers to achieving a Circular Economy in these uncertain times.
