

# AS TRASH PILES UP, SO DO THE PROBLEMS

## Broken Hartford plant violated environmental permits because of garbage backlog, state says

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The months-long shutdown of the regional trash-to-energy plant in Hartford has resulted in trash piling up inside the facility, waste being shipped out of state and now the operators storing tons of partially processed garbage in outdoor containers in violation of state permits.



Connecticut's environmental agency has ordered the plant's operators to move dozens of the covered containers back inside the plant, citing potential odor and safety concerns, officials said Friday.

The Hartford facility is already holding an estimated 20,000 tons of garbage in its main indoor space and sending thousands of tons of trash a week to out-of-state landfills and facilities. The plant's two turbines suffered catastrophic breakdowns on Nov. 5 and the facility hasn't been operating since then.

"We're moving the stuff back inside so far as we can," Thomas Kirk, president of the plant's operators, the quasi-public Materials Innovation and Recycling Authority (MIRA), said of the trash containers that were stored outdoors.

Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin called it "unacceptable for trash to pile up outside that facility" and said he is glad state environmental regulators ordered MIRA to bring those containers back indoors.

"The breakdown of the MIRA facility is a problem for much of the state," Bronin said. "But as the trash mounts up there, it is becoming a particular problem for businesses and residents around the plant."

State officials say they are now considering the garbage agency's request for emergency permission to store the partially processed trash outside in those large, Dumpster-like containers.

MIRA officials now hope to have the plant back in operation by the end of this month. “We’re cautiously optimistic we will have it up and running by then,” Kirk said.

In the meantime, the plant’s operators have been sending more than 7,000 tons of garbage a week to trash plants and landfills in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Virginia. MIRA officials estimate disposing of all that garbage cost their agency an additional \$276,000 each week in December.

The Hartford plant serves about 70 member cities and towns across Connecticut. Garbage haulers from non-member communities that are normally allowed to bring trash to the Hartford facility have been forced to find other places to dispose of that garbage since the Nov. 5 breakdown.

Kirk said his agency believes it can recover a significant portion of the expense of repairing the turbines and the additional costs to send trash to other facilities and landfills through insurance claims.

But he warned that MIRA’s member communities will see some increases in tipping fees as a result of this crisis.

MIRA charges its member communities \$74 per ton to dispose of their garbage. MIRA officials estimate that the average cost for sending that trash to out-of-state or other Connecticut facilities is about \$113 per ton, and additional expense of \$39 a ton.

The total estimated cost for shipping and disposing of that trash for the month of December was more than \$1.1 million, according to MIRA officials. Kirk said the quasi-public agency’s reserve funds are more than able to handle the immediate additional cost issues.

The plant has been out of operation since Nov. 5 after the facility’s two huge turbines failed. One of the repaired turbines is expected to be returned from St. Louis back by Jan. 15, and should be installed, tested and ready for operation by the last week of this month, Kirk said.

Kirk said getting the one turbine back will enable MIRA “to get two-thirds of the plan up and running.” The second turbine is expected to be repaired and returned to Hartford by mid-February. This is the first time in the history of the facility, which has been operating as a trash-to-energy plant since 1988, that both turbines have failed at the same time.

State officials have selected a new private operator to renovate and upgrade the old plant, but there have been delays in negotiating a final agreement.

Bronin said he’s always believed “that it was a mistake for the state to focus solely on the South Meadows facility as a solution to Connecticut’s waste disposal needs.”

The antiquated Hartford plant has three steam-generating boilers that are heated by burning trash. One operating turbine can handle the steam from two of the three boilers, according to Kirk. “After we get the first turbine up and running, the problems become so diminished that it’s a manageable problem,” Kirk said.

To reduce the massive garbage backlog at the plant in Hartford’s South Meadows, MIRA officials have been processing some of it into a less bulky form of fuel for the facility’s boilers. That partially processed trash is the fuel that MIRA has been storing outdoors in containers.

In a letter to DEEP dated Dec. 31, the plant’s operators asked for state permission to store partially processed trash in covered containers on about 5.4 acres of outdoor space around the Hartford facility.

“We have a few dozen roll-off containers out there right now,” Kirk said Friday of the outdoor storage units. “We’re working to bring them inside... but it’s going to take a while.”

“MIRA is currently storing waste in a manner that is not authorized under their permit by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection,” DEEP spokesman Chris Collibee said Friday. “The site is not permitted for extensive outdoor storage of waste for extended periods,” Lee Sawyer, DEEP’s planning director for materials management, said. According to Sawyer, state officials want MIRA to examine all possible options inside Connecticut for disposing of the mountains of garbage coming into the Hartford plant.

In recent weeks, officials in Hartford rejected MIRA’s request to reopen the former landfill in North Hartford known as “Mount Trashmore.” A similar request to use the current landfill in Manchester for some of the MIRA garbage was also rejected by officials in that city.

Kirk said MIRA has been attempting to use other trash-to-energy plants in Connecticut “but they’re all at capacity... There’s just no excess capacity that we can count on here in Connecticut,” he said.

Thomas Gaffey, head of MIRA’s recycling operations, said agency officials check daily with trash facilities in Connecticut and across the northeast in an effort to find places to dispose of the trash that continues to come into the Hartford plant.

Gaffey said several facilities in Massachusetts and New York that were accepting MIRA’s garbage have recently said they can no longer take the Connecticut trash.

“There is really no spare capacity in the northeast,” Kirk said.

Between Nov. 5 and Dec. 19, the Hartford plant received approximately 36,780 tons of trash from member cities and towns, according to MIRA records. During that period, the agency sent out 13,252 tons for disposal, nearly all of it to facilities outside Connecticut.