

01/12/19: Trash plant breakdown causing higher costs for businesses, homeowners in some towns

Trash haulers and their business and residential customers in about 20 Connecticut cities and towns are facing higher disposal costs because of the months-long breakdown of the Hartford regional garbage-to-energy plant.

Garbage companies serving communities that aren't members of the regional refuse system run by the **Materials Innovation and Recycling Authority** (MIRA) have been banned from bringing trash to the Hartford facility since the plant shut down in November.

MIRA's member municipalities have so far been insulated from the rising costs of disposing of the mountains of trash that have built up since the facility closed. But agency officials say those towns will eventually be charged more for disposal to help cover the added costs resulting from the shutdown.

The private trash haulers banned from using the regional plant have been scrambling to find other disposal facilities and several who were interviewed for this story say they are now paying significantly higher fees. The result in many cases is that those added costs are being passed along to residential and business customers.

"It's impacting everybody," Mike Paine, of the East Granby-based trash hauler Paine's Inc., said of the Hartford plant's shutdown. Paine said his company has customers in towns that include Windsor Locks, Vernon and Suffield.

Paine said fees he's now paying at other disposal facilities are \$20 a ton higher than he paid at the MIRA plant, but he declined to comment when asked if those additional costs are being passed along to his customers.

MIRA officials say the reason they've been forced to ban trash from non-member towns is the huge backlog of refuse that has piled up inside the plant in recent months and the high costs of sending thousands of tons of trash out of state.

"Our first responsibility is to our [member] contract customers," said MIRA Board Chair Donald S. Stein.

The MIRA plant normally takes in trash from about one-third of the state. The facility's closure has created a massive oversupply of garbage that is more than other disposal sites and processing facilities in Connecticut can handle. There are only four other trash-to-energy plants in this state.

MIRA has had to send some of its refuse to garbage-to-energy plants and landfills in states as far away as Virginia. "Connecticut and surrounding states have no margin of capacity for disposal," said Thomas Kirk, MIRA's president. "There are no landfills or plants that can handle our surplus waste when we have a problem."

The additional expense of transporting and disposing of all that refuse outside Connecticut has already cost MIRA more than \$1 million. Agency officials say they are using the system's cash reserves to protect their 51 long-term member communities from the immediate cost impact of this crisis.

Kirk said the agency's insurance will help offset some of the added expenses of dealing with the shutdown but that the system's member communities will eventually have to pay more to MIRA to cover all of the costs involved.

"The price for disposal [of garbage from member cities and towns] will certainly be higher because of this," Kirk said.

Robert Norton, general manager of All Waste in Hartford, said his company is having to find alternative trash disposal sites for "hundreds of tons a week" as a result of the MIRA plant's shutdown.

"The tonnage rates are generally higher [for disposing of trash at alternative sites]... if they accept it at all," Norton said, adding that his company and other haulers are passing along those additional costs to customers.

All Waste takes refuse from about 80 of Connecticut's 169 cities and towns. In the Hartford area, those include communities like West Hartford, Newington and South Windsor.

Eric Fredericksen, director of operations for Enfield-based USA Hauling and Recycling, said the months-long garbage plant closure has definitely caused some problems. “We are seeing increased costs, combining disposal fees and transportation [to alternative disposal sites],” he said.

According to Fredericksen, USA has “so far been able to insulate ourselves” from most of the financial issues resulting from the plant closure. He said that the company has been able to absorb the added costs without having to raise disposal fees for its customers.

Fredericksen said MIRA officials “are doing a good job managing a difficult situation.”

The 30-year-old trash-to-energy plant suffered failures of both its turbines in early November. The plant is designed to burn garbage to generate steam for the turbines to turn into electricity. But without the two turbines, which were sent to St. Louis for repairs, the facility couldn’t function.

Kirk said his staff is hoping one of the turbines will be back and running by the last week in January, allowing about two-thirds of the plant to resume operations. The second turbine isn’t expected to get back to Hartford until mid-February.

But the expected restart of the facility isn’t expected to provide any immediate financial relief to trash haulers servicing non-MIRA member municipalities.

Stein said there is such a backlog of trash piled up at the Hartford plant that it’s likely to take some time “to get rid of it.” Stein said he expects there will be “some time lag before we can accept non-contract waste” again.

MIRA officials estimate they have 20,000 tons of garbage piled up inside the Hartford plant.

There was so much trash that the agency began partially processing it into a type of fuel for the facility’s boilers, and storing the trash-fuel in big covered containers on the grounds surrounding the plant – a practice state officials say **violated the facility’s environmental permits**. MIRA has been ordered to move that material back inside the facility.