

DEEP DIVE

Pandemics were not part of most contingency plans, but waste and recycling industry proving resilient

Precautions previously in place for industry disruptions did not account for a coronavirus-induced economic disruption. Companies and public sector consultants discuss what's next more than a month in

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The waste and recycling industry has contingency plans in place for many disruptions – hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards and much more. Working during a pandemic was not something most service providers had anticipated. It will be now.

As the novel coronavirus has gripped the world, continuity plan playbooks have been dusted off and special task forces are holding frequent calls within many organizations. Service has been cut back, and some facilities have temporarily closed, but material is still being managed. While the crisis is not over, and maintaining service for many companies and local governments remains a challenge, there are early signs that some of the most dire scenarios have yet to occur on a large scale.

Many industry professionals Waste Dive spoke with in recent weeks cited adaptability and flexibility as the driving force in

keeping operations going, more so than following a pre-existing plan.

"I've not seen a plan that would have taken this into account ... Disaster debris planning is a very fundamental part of a solid waste management plan. What are we going to do if the hurricane strikes, particularly in those areas prone to hurricanes? What are we going to do if we get three feet of snow?" said Steve Simmons, president of consulting firm Gershman, Brickner & Bratton (GBB). "I don't think anyone would have written a plan to say, what if our economy is just totally turned on its head overnight?"

Simmons said this wasn't currently a topic GBB had been fielding calls about for near-term advice. The time for planning had passed, but those that had some experience dealing with major disruptions may have been more ready to adapt.

Michelle Leonard, vice president of the firm SCS Engineers, also said clients she works with were largely caught off guard. Though, she said, prior disasters that disrupted operations in her home state helped inform the current response.

"Unfortunately in California we've experienced some similar situations when we've had our fire seasons, had to respond to... a workforce emergency, when people had to evacuate their homes," she said.

With fire seasons only expected to worsen in coming years, a trend scientists attribute to climate change, California has learned to adapt more quickly and may have inadvertently been better prepared for the pandemic.

Other communities have also benefited on a case-by-case basis from looking ahead. Amy Dzialowski, an SCS Engineers project director and expert on brownfields, said she has worked with

municipal clients on devising plans aimed at long-term contingency planning.

Following turmoil in recycling markets and other factors, Dzialowski said she has seen "more municipalities really start to grow more into a master plan in terms of their solid waste practice." Those clients, she said, have been "much more agile" in responding to the pandemic's impacts, because they have "a deeper understanding of their existing conditions and baseline conditions."

Beyond local governments, which firms like GBB or SCS often advise, the private sector was also not anticipating such a disruptive event.

The National Waste & Recycling Association (NWRA) said the full weight of the issue was first felt by many of its members around the weekend of March 7. According to Darrell Smith, NWRA's president and CEO, this required a level of engagement with regulators and government officials unlike most anything in his career to date.

"We had to establish new procedures and methods here to act very quickly for the industry," he said, adding while some association members were versed in large crises — Hurricane Katrina in 2005, for example — the COVID-19 pandemic has no clear-cut comparison. "Most of it was new territory," said Smith.

Many of the initial requests made by NWRA and other trade groups such as the Solid Waste Association of North America (SWANA) and Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries were described by those groups as proactive, with some becoming necessary sooner than others. Receiving "essential" designation from the Department of Homeland Security and state

governments, as well as having hours-of-service and other related requirements waived by the Department of Transportation, were among the first priorities.

While some of those requests were more pressing and followed previous steps, many of the precautionary measures taken by associations and service providers in the weeks since have largely been unprecedented.

"I haven't really heard any of our members that saw this coming," said Smith. "I don't think anyone in society saw this coming."



"essential workers; hometown heroes" by Robert Couse-Baker is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Rapid fire planning

During the early, tumultuous weeks of the pandemic designation — as national, state and local governments declared emergencies — NWRA began asking state regulators for regulatory flexibility based on a stark list of scenarios. Letters sent out across the country outlined the potential for reduced staffing due to illness or

childcare issues, lack of access to personal protective equipment (PPE), limited operations at some locations due to social distancing guidelines and other possibilities.

Some of those scenarios have occurred in certain markets, and continue to, though overall reports indicate issues are not universal across the industry. In many cases that may be because of changes employers made, or were prepared to make, in order to keep service going.

One of the first big shifts (made alongside efforts for frontline employees) was to move all office employees to remote arrangements. Companies, governments and trade groups of various sizes reported a significant effort to shift their teams from dispatching, sales, customer service, IT, accounting and other divisions. Many laptops were purchased, many technical issues were sorted through.

"I would say we've taken unprecedented steps to move thousands of people home," said Waste Management COO John Morris in late March. "We've made a lot of changes to protocol."

For frontline collection crews, the policy in many areas has been to change route times to enable greater distancing, and expand access to PPE. Dzialowski said some municipalities are also relying on a "one week on, one week off" approach to ensure their overall workforce remains stable at various locations. That rotation limits the number of workers potentially exposed to the virus at any one time.

As life increasingly shifts to staying at home across the country, this has also meant a major uptick in residential volume — forcing a shift in priorities for many haulers.

"What we've said to our municipal customers is we don't know what the future is going to look like, but we want to prioritize MSW, recycling, yard and bulk in that order," said Pete Keller, vice president of recycling and sustainability for Republic Services, in early April.

On the facility side, companies such as Waste Management and Republic have also outlined the possibility of only running MRFs to sort certain materials as one way to handle limited staffing. So far, outside of some facility closures or limitations in California and a few other states, the issue has not been as severe as initially feared.

For other types of facilities more sensitive to volume changes, and more complex to turn on or off, staffing contingency plans are becoming more pressing.

"We have put into place very careful shift mandates to make sure that if we lose an operator, that we can cover with the other part of the workforce. Our hope is that we don't just have a simultaneous drop on multiple operators," said John Hanselman, CEO of the Northeast-based anaerobic digestion company Vanguard Renewables, in late March. Many of the company's digesters are located on farms, which also provides a unique back-up option.

"What's been remarkable is our farmers have really jumped up and offered their help and services and they've been cross-trained on a lot of different components," he said. As of this week, Vanguard reported no virus-related sick days among its staff.

Companies operating various types of incinerators face similar concerns. In late March, Covanta outlined changes such as delaying or reducing the scope of planned maintenance in order to keep facilities available while also thinking about how to handle

staffing disruptions. Derek Veenhof, the company's executive vice president of asset management, likened it to how shifts are handled during the holiday season to allow for time off — only on at a heightened level.

"If we need to, we're going to host facility operating personnel for extended periods of time near our operating plants as essential workers," he said, describing how Covanta would pay for food and lodging in this scenario. "We've got a place for these people to go, [so] they can feel safe." This week, Covanta confirmed it has not had to take such steps yet.

Selin Hoboy, a vice president of government affairs and compliance with Stericycle, said the company's standard contingency plans apply in this case. The company has "pre-designated alternate facilities" to be used in case of any shutdown situation. That is in addition to flexibility around staffing; due to the company's size, Hoboy said operational team members can easily be shifted around between locations in a situation involving a facility staffing shortage.

Still, shifts in volume and location have prompted some changes. "Our continuity planning has expanded to include the development of operating plans for emerging services, like remote pick-ups at pop-up testing facilities or servicing large quarantine sites," said Hoboy.

And while landfills may be more adaptable in terms of volume shifts, experts said working through staffing situations is still critical.

"A waste-to-energy plant, an anaerobic digester, they operate 24 hours a day 7 days a week 365 days a year. There's always someone there because the process continues. Landfills do shut down at

night, and they generally do shut down over the weekends, but still they need to be there every day," said GBB's Simmons.



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A more resilient future

As the pandemic continues, the industry's capabilities remain under pressure. The coronavirus has already had serious effects for some workers in the sector. The road ahead to recovery is long.

At the same time, early reports indicate the industry has been generally successful in adapting to new social distancing requirements, major residential volume shifts and other factors.

"I am very impressed with how the vast majority of both governmental and companies have been able to adjust to the dramatic changes in waste volumes without any disruption in service," said SWANA CEO David Biderman in early April.

Contingency plans are expected to be reshaped by the crisis for years to come, but some early ideas are already emerging.

"After the smoke clears, which it certainly hasn't yet, people will start sitting back and figure out what they've learned from this," said NWRA's Smith, noting how his organization will likely turn their own response procedures into a crisis playbook for the future. "I guarantee you a lot of our members, and other people in the world, will be building up a supply of PPE to have for emergencies."

Smith said he also anticipates changes such as service providers planning ahead for emergency hand-washing stations on their collection trucks, for example.

Vita Quinn, a project director and solid waste finance expert with SCS Engineers, said the long-term fiscal implications could also be resounding. Property taxes, which supply a significant amount of municipal revenue, would likely be affected in a global recession. In an effort to help municipal clients, many of whom are now having to revise their annual budgets, Quinn said she is looking into options like grants for critical infrastructure projects.

"That will at least get you through the next couple of fiscal years," she said, pointing to five-year plans that prioritize capital projects and account for longer-term impacts.

However, Quinn highlighted the stark reality of the situation and projected a "natural contraction" at landfills as people purchase less and the economy falters. "I understand what people are saying when they say, 'We're going to bounce back,'" she said, caveating that "it's not just as easy as keeping the lights on."

Those deep-reaching impacts will likely reshape the industry in many ways. Experts across the sector said contingency planning will take on a new level of importance in the future, as stakeholders

assess and review their approaches in the time following the pandemic's ultimate abatement.

"This is taking people by surprise, be it how we structure our companies, our economy," said Simmons. "Resiliency is going to be the new buzzword."