



# AFTER THE SMOKE CLEARS

In the world of materials processing, facility fires are an unfortunate fact of life. The story of an incident in Michigan shows the value of having plans and partners in place.

BY MELISSA RADIWON

May 27, 2014 could have been any other Tuesday in Southfield, Mich., with a mostly cloudy sky and temperatures in the mid-70s. Conversations about the recent Memorial Day weekend were heard from the full shift of 25 workers at the Resource Recovery and Recycling Authority of Southwest Oakland County (RRRASOC) materials recovery facility before employees entered the plant and the hum of the equipment took over.

Mike Csapo, RRRASOC's general manager, was on-site that day. Around noon, Csapo decided to enjoy the good weather and walk down the street to grab lunch. As he returned to the property and walked toward the building, he was met by Laura Shaw, RRRASOC's administrative secretary. "There's a fire," she said. Suddenly, a typical Tuesday was transformed into an emergency situation.

Alarms had been tripped and the fire department had been called. "At that point, your reaction revolves around, 'Is anyone hurt? Is everyone safe?'" recalled Csapo. In the case of that late-spring fire, those most important questions had relieving answers. No one was injured or killed.

However, once the safety of workers and responders was assured, a new set of questions arose. How to handle the material scheduled to come to the plant? Who could be trusted to help the facility re-build? And how would operators deal with unexpected issues along the way? The RRRASOC team worked through all those uncertainties over the past year. And the MRF's experience moving forward from the flames offers key lessons for other operators.

## Proactive on procedure

Before touching on rebuilding, it's important to understand why the day of the fire did not become a tragic one. ReCommunity, the private operator of the public RRRASOC facility, had established safety protocols that were regularly practiced by the employees. Having those protocols and hosting practice drills paid off that Tuesday afternoon. Everyone followed procedure – shutdown, exit, assemble, head count, call fire department – and no injuries were sustained.

As the fire grew and the smoke and heat intensified, fire departments from multiple jurisdictions on-site took into account the safety of the first responders as well as others in the area, and determined they needed to take a defensive strategy. They moved the firefighters from inside the building and worked the fire from outside, with the goal of controlling the fire and stopping it from spreading to nearby structures.

"This wasn't just a place of work," Csapo said. "As a professional with both feet firmly in this field, this was a symbol of commitment to the Detroit metropolitan area, to the working and living conditions on Eight Mile, and to the member communities of RRRASOC."

Indeed, RRRASOC was more than just a 53,000-square-foot facility utilizing single-stream processing and handling up to 25 tons of recyclable material per hour while shipping approximately 60,000 tons of material per year. RRRASOC served approximately 249,000 residents in the cities of Farmington, Farmington Hills,

Novi, South Lyon, Southfield, Walled Lake and Wixom – all located in Oakland County just north of Detroit's Wayne County. Those residents and the commercial clients serviced through third-party haulers counted on the Southfield facility to provide and maintain a critical community service.

Premeditated procedures helped keep the service intact. Perhaps the most important consideration was dealing with the haulers that were bringing materials – contracted, curbside, commercial, document shredding and more – to the public-private facility. After all, for them it was still any normal Tuesday.

ReCommunity contacted dispatch to inform all haulers that were routing to RRRASOC to re-route to one of three other ReCommunity facilities in the area – Rosville, Ann Arbor or Huron Township. In addition, an operational supervisor was placed at a nearby intersection to intercept any haulers that may not have been reached yet by dispatch. Without this pre-planned re-routing built into the ReCommunity-RRRASOC agreement, the facility would have faced a line of trucks full of materials and nowhere to unload.

Still, although many standard operating procedures (SOPs) were previously established and performed well in the situation, some instances required on-the-spot expertise. The fire department was on the scene for four days dealing with smoldering material and hotspots. This was partly because the MRF had loose material on the tip floor and on conveyor belts. The conveyor belts themselves, if not made of steel, were flammable. Bales of material didn't stop burning by pouring water on them – the bales need-



*The RRRASOC fire shut down a facility that processed 60,000 tons a year.*

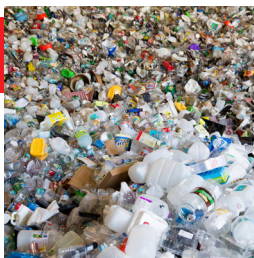
ed to be extracted from the building, broken open and hosed down from there. Some material was smoldering inside of balers and other equipment.

Furthermore, ReCommunity had a stainless steel compactor trailer designed to accept loose newspaper. The trailer was three-quarters full of newspaper and burning. The tires had been burnt off the trailer and portions of the trailer had been fused to the compactor chute on the building. The fire department broke diamond-tip saws trying to gain entry to the trailer. The solution? Use an excavator to break apart the trailer, pull out bucket loads of the smoldering and flaming newspaper, and dump the

material into the flooded loading dock area (it was flooded due to the fact that the lift pump that would normally pump water out of the loading dock area wasn't functioning – a blessing in disguise). These situations weren't in the SOP book.

## Keeping stakeholders informed

Communication was another crucial element to dealing with issues in the aftermath of the fire. Csapo immediately began contacting the RRRASOC board of directors with emphasis on two points: that no one was hurt, and no impact would be felt at



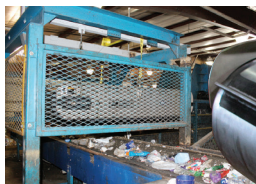
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the curb. City officials and department of public works representatives were relieved to learn the contingency plans for re-routing to other MRFs would maintain current service without interruption, meaning their residents wouldn't see recycling piling up at the curb. Routine status updates were given to the board and city officials to keep them abreast of the situation during and after the fire.

It is important to note that the reason residents weren't affected was the contingency plan that had been established long before the fire first sparked. The fact that ReCommunity operated several MRFs within the local area certainly helped with the ease of managing the material. If the facility were a stand-alone, it would have been even more imperative to have that contingency plan in place. Contract negotiations and agreements take time to develop, and in a crisis situation, that could lead to interruption of service and major material pileups.

After the immediate situation had settled, it was time to evaluate what resources were going to be needed to recover from the fire. Soon after the event, Csapo went to the RRRASOC board and asked for additional funding to hire the qualified



*The fire department was on the scene for four days dealing with smoldering material and other complexities.*

external professional resources that would be required to navigate the process: forensic accountants (Plante Moran), legal counsel (Miller Canfield) and engineering experts (RRS). These entities would help to provide

a third-party view of the event and navigate through the insurance claim process.

The insurance company was on-site within 48 hours to get a feel for the magnitude of the loss. Throughout the investiga-

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tion, specialists were brought to the facility, and Csapo recalls having site investigation meetings with as many as 50 people.

RRRASOC also wanted their experts to evaluate the damage to the equipment and the building. However, until the insurance company released the building, those experts could look, but not touch. Nothing could be moved during the fire investigation. Said Csapo, "If you can't move the stuff that is in the way, that makes looking at a conveyor that is up on a platform a bit difficult."

It was important to get the third-party viewpoint to compare and confirm the insurance engineer's report. RRRASOC contracted RRS to evaluate the condition of much of the equipment in the MRF. What, if anything, was salvageable? What might repairs cost? How about full replacement? "When I was standing in the parking lot looking at a burnt out building, trying to imagine what would be in its place, I was relieved to have long-standing partners to rely on," Csapo said. "In this case, RRS helped me see conceptually an equipment layout, and I could trust them to help frame my expectations."

## Next steps

No official cause of the fire has been determined. However, the fire was first observed in the vicinity of the infed conveyor.

Repairs began on the building in December 2014. The offices were reoccupied in July 2015, and new equipment has been ordered with installation to begin fall of 2015. RRRASOC plans to be processing materials by late winter or early spring 2016.

The insurance fully covered the building repairs and equipment replacement as well as 12 months of lost business income and certain extra expenses. RRRASOC incurred a modest amount of legal, accounting and engineering fees that weren't covered by the insurance. These services were externally contracted because the group didn't have that expertise in-house.

The existence of a public-private partnership has been a definite advantage in this situation, with the pact between RRRASOC and ReCommunity bringing resiliency and opportunity. The MRF was able to move material to other locations. At the same time, employees were given the opportunity to relocate to another ReCommunity location during the investigation and rebuild. This meant that workers might have had to travel further than their normal commute



*Repairs to the RRRASOC facility began last December, and it is expected to be running again in spring 2016.*

so ReCommunity provided shuttle service from the RRRASOC facility to the Ann Arbor ReCommunity site to support the transition.

The specifics of the fire and its aftermath demonstrate the importance of reviewing policies and processes regularly. "Most of us regularly evaluate the level of coverage we have, but when you run into an event like this, you start to second-guess yourself," said Csapo. "Do I have the right coverage? What are my exposures? What are our liabilities? Will we be made whole?"

He recommends establishing relationships before you have a reason to depend

on people. "You don't want to open up the phone book the day of a fire to select legal counsel or an engineer," he said. "You should build up a level of trust with your circle of close advisors so when you are in a situation to need them, they're not a stranger to you or your situation."

Such relationships allow an operator to breathe a little easier, even when smoke is still filling the air. **RR**

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