

BRIEF

Multiple states suspend landfill bans for yard waste over COVID-19 fallout



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AUTHOR

E.A. Crunden
@eacrun

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Dive Brief:

- Some states are suspending their bans on landscape waste in landfills due to ongoing impacts and concerns relating to the new coronavirus pandemic. Those states include Iowa, which confirmed to Waste Dive its ban had been suspended as part of an effort to allow the workforce to prioritize keeping landfills operational.
- Environmental guidance issued by Kentucky and West Virginia, and reviewed by Waste Dive, also shows those states have adjusted their yard waste guidance. Both states are allowing yard waste to be commingled with recycling for disposal.
- Those decisions come as haulers and local governments have themselves suspended bulk and yard waste collection in numerous states. The rationale behind those suspensions hinges on dwindling resources and a scarcity of essential workers at a time when municipal solid waste and recycling collection is being prioritized over other programs.

Dive Insight:

Nora Goldstein, editor of the publication BioCycle, told Waste Dive many landfill bans on yard waste were put into place during the 1980s and early 1990s, part of a response to [Subtitle D of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act \(RCRA\)](#).

"Standard landfills that didn't meet RCRA requirements were going to have to close, so states started looking at ways to preserve existing landfill space or better utilize space in an approved landfill," Goldstein said.

[According to 2017 data](#) collected by the Northeast Recycling Council, more than 20 states have restrictions regarding yard waste in landfills. But the pandemic is leading some to reconsider those policies.

Many states already offer caveats to their bans, with some allowing leaves or grass but not brush, for example, and others making exemptions for some types of landfills. Mike Smith, a spokesperson for Iowa's Department of Natural Resources, told Waste Dive the state previously allowed yard waste to go to landfills with gas collection systems. But Iowa is among states now waiving its ban entirely.

"Our logic was that the collection industry might be short-staffed and might not be able to make multiple passes down [their routes]," Smith said. "This allows them to make one run down the street instead of two."

Iowa's [COVID-19 enforcement and compliance protocol](#), issued March 17 and set to run through April 30, underscores freeing up workers with the end goal of keeping landfills open and operating. Individual landfill operators still have say over whether or not they accept yard waste during the period when the ban is suspended, Smith said.

West Virginia followed suit soon after Iowa. "Your facility may accept recyclables and yard waste for disposal," wrote Kathryn Emery, the state's acting waste director, in a March 22 notice.

Rebecca Goodman, secretary of the Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet, similarly declared in a March 26 bulletin that "recyclables and yard waste may be co-mingled for transportation, processing, and disposal," in a break from the state's typical restrictions.

While municipalities have deemed general waste collection to be essential, some have suspended or scaled back programs for organics and bulk items. Workers are increasingly in short supply, and concerns over finances and adhering to guidance regarding social distancing and containment measures are also playing a role.

Other factors driving that decision-making process include the shift many areas are seeing as commercial waste volumes decrease while residential waste spikes. Many large haulers, including Waste Management, Republic Services and Waste Connections, have suspended yard waste collection in certain areas during recent weeks. GFL Environmental made a similar

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announcement in Michigan this week, before [walking the plan back that same day](#).

Yard and bulk waste collection [has also been momentarily abandoned](#) in Macon-Bibb County, Georgia, for example, as the area's waste workers have been reassigned to help Advance Disposal Services catch up on general waste collection.

In Virginia, Loudoun County is seeing an uptick in yard waste piles. Local media [reported](#) that while neighboring Fairfax County and Prince William County have allowed area-based Patriot Disposal to suspend yard waste pickup due to exposure concerns, Loudoun has not granted the company permission. To do so, the county would need permission from its Board of Supervisors, which has not yet acted.

At least one area is ramping up collection efforts in response to growing yard waste issues. Pensacola, Florida [is seeing a staggering spike](#) in yard waste — a 185% increase to 100 tons per day, seemingly caused by people staying home and doing yard work. While Pensacola is about a week behind on pickup, city sanitation workers have volunteered to spend federal holidays and weekends helping to collect the overflow.

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