

Pilot project to treat PFAS at Vermont landfill malfunctions

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NEWPORT, Vt. (WCAX) - Vermont's only landfill has a leachate leak. The incident involves a pilot project aimed at treating the dangerous array of chemicals known as PFAS.

It's a setback in Vermont's fight against toxic "forever chemicals."

"The chief of one of the divisions within DEC called it a shakedown trial. Well, it shook down last week," said Henry Coe of Don't Undermine Memphremagog's Purity.

Coe is talking about a leak of thousands of gallons of trash juice, water that leaches out of the Coventry landfill.

An experimental technology is being used by landfill owner Casella aimed at filtering out so-called forever chemicals from the landfill leachate. The process, one of the first in the country, is called foam fractionation. A video from the manufacturer shared with us by Casella describes it as, "Millions of rising air bubbles that attract the PFAS compounds and remove them from contaminated water that is pumped through a network of highly specialized fractionation tanks." The PFAS byproduct is then injected into concrete blocks and placed back in the landfill, safely stored for the long term.

On Feb. 24, part of the system failed and 8,500 gallons of leachate leaked from the treatment unit. Officials with Casella say all of the leachate was contained on site, and that they alongside contractors worked to clean up the mess. They stress that no effluent made it into the nearby Black River.

"These systems are put in place to protect the environment and give people that sense of confidence and understand that it is not escaping into the environment," said Jeff Weld of Casella.

PFAS are found in numerous consumer goods from clothing to furniture, carpets, food packaging and more.

"These materials show up in landfills based on behaviors that are happening way upstream," Weld said.

State lawmakers and the EPA are drafting bans on certain products to keep PFAS out of the waste stream altogether.

"There's really two sides to the story. There's the part about treating for these chemicals, and having a system that works effectively," said Josh Kelly of the Vt. Department of Environmental Conservation.

Back at the landfill, Coe says the state should have stricter oversight on treatment permits.

"Accidents will happen. Prohibit anything like this from happening in the future," he said.

While Casella investigates what went wrong, the PFAS project has been put on hold until it can be moved to a permanent facility this summer. In the meantime, the leachate will be trucked to Plattsburgh's wastewater facility.