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Casella wants to expand Old Town landfill before it runs out of space

by **Valerie Royzman**

10 hours ago



A compactor drives over trash at the Juniper Ridge Landfill in Old Town on Jan. 19, 2022. Credit: Linda Coan O'Kresik / BDN

Casella wants Maine to extend its contract to operate Juniper Ridge landfill in Old Town because it needs to plan to expand as the landfill nears its capacity, a spokesperson said Monday.

The contract between the state and a Casella Waste Systems subsidiary, New England Waste Services of Maine LLC, to manage the landfill doesn't expire for another decade. But extending it from February 2034 to February 2040 is necessary because Casella anticipates the landfill will exhaust its capacity, which is just under 10 million cubic yards, in 2028, spokesperson Jeff Weld said.

Should the state extend Casella's contract to manage Juniper Ridge Landfill?

Yes

No

Casella needs its contract extended before it invests the time, money and resources required to expand Juniper Ridge, Weld said. Without that assurance, it's difficult to plan an expansion beyond 2034, he said. The most recent expansion at the landfill took more than 10 years because of the necessary regulatory approvals and construction before waste could be accepted.

Rather than seek an expansion that would get the landfill through 2034, or roughly 7 million more cubic yards, it would be more economically and environmentally sustainable to plan for an additional 12 million cubic yards, he said.

Casella's plans for expansion were not available because the process has just begun, and the company intends to file the first of many parts of the application this summer, Weld said.

Groups against Casella's request say the landfill has been harmful to the environment and the health of those living nearby. Nora Bosworth, Conservation Law Foundation's staff attorney for the Zero Waste Project, said extending Casella's contract before the decision to expand the landfill is vetted and the public has a chance to meaningfully engage undermines the rights of Mainers.

"It sends the message, quite plainly, that the expansion is a done deal and that the various administrative stages of scrutiny amount to a rubber stamp," she said. "Mainers deserve more."

Juniper Ridge has received slightly more than 50 percent of all waste material landfilled in Maine since 2018, according to the state's [waste management and recycling plan](#), which was updated this year. It has received an average of 702,597 tons of material annually over the past five years.

Starting in August 2022, most municipal sludge generated in Maine was disposed of at Juniper Ridge, according to the plan. Sludge is mixed with stabilizing materials, which adds volume and takes up more landfill space.

In October, Rep. James Dill, D-Old Town and area officials [shared concerns](#) about the landfill filling too quickly because 160 towns in central and northern Maine were sending unprocessed trash there. The landfill has about five years before it runs out of space.

That's because a state-of-the-art trash plant in Hampden, which served 115 municipalities, stopped operating in 2020. In May, the Penobscot Energy Recovery Co.'s trash plant in Orrington that served 44 towns also ceased operations.

The Hampden trash plant was sold and could reopen as early as 2025. Meanwhile, PERC was sold at an auction and is reopening under a new name, Garbage Recycling and Clean Energy, or GRACE.

Last week, members of the public weighed in on the contract extension during a hearing in Brewer. Among the concerns of those protesting was an unexplained fire last May and cancer-causing per- and polyfluoroalkyl compounds — also called PFAS — leaching into the Penobscot River watershed.

Knowing nearby residents have complained of odors and the effects that the landfill has had on the Penobscot Nation, it's inappropriate to extend Casella's contract before the landfill expansion has gone through its due process, Bosworth said.

She noted that it is critical to add terms to the contract requiring Casella to treat the landfill's wastewater for PFAS and other hazardous chemicals.

Maine's lawmakers are considering a bill sponsored by Dill, LD 2135, which directs the state to investigate solutions to the solid waste management crisis and report its findings by June 1, 2024.

If the bill becomes law, it remains to be seen what effect it would have on Casella's timeline, though the company suspects it would face delays, Weld said. This would put Maine at additional risk with regards to its in-state disposal capacity, he said.

In the 2024 waste management and recycling plan, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection recognized that the expansion of Juniper Ridge is critical to achieving its broader goals, he said.

“Casella has been a willing and effective collaborator with the state of Maine over the past two decades of operating its landfill, and we intend to continue for many years to come,” Weld said. “However, it is important to understand that there are significant unintended consequences and potential for delays with the passing of this kind of legislation.”

