

# Changes in sludge disposal needed to avert a ‘public health crisis’



by [The BDN Editorial Board](#) March 4, 2023 Updated 7 hours ago



Amanda Smith, director of water quality management, City of Bangor, walks past the primary clarifier which is used to separate solids from the raw wastewater at the Wastewater Treatment Plant on Wednesday. Credit: Linda Coan O'Kresik / BDN

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After the operator of the state's largest landfill said it would not pick up millions of pounds of wastewater sludge, some Maine communities say they will run out of options for handling the material, and it could end up in the state's rivers.

"This is a statewide issue. If this goes unsolved, this will become a human health and environmental crisis," Amanda Smith, the water quality management director for the Bangor Wastewater Treatment Plant, told the Bangor Daily News.

The Legislature's Environment and Natural Resources Committee has scheduled a meeting for Wednesday on the situation. Lawmakers, and the public, need to better understand what factors, including new laws and financial concerns, are driving the policy change. They should also clarify what alternatives are viable and how they can be implemented quickly before this situation worsens.

Casella Waste Systems operates the state-owned Juniper Ridge Landfill in Old Town, which handles sludge from about 30 communities, including Bangor, Portland and Scarborough. The company said it must significantly reduce the amount of sludge it accepts because it didn't have enough bulky waste to mix in with the more liquidy waste.

Some of the sludge is being taken to Canada, at considerable extra cost to wastewater districts and towns. Some pickups have been delayed or canceled, leaving the managers of wastewater treatment facilities worrying about what they will do with their sludge in coming days.

Instead of landfilling its sludge, the Kennebec Sanitary Treatment District in Waterville now must store most of it in tanks, said Nick Champagne, the wastewater treatment plant's superintendent. There may be space in the tanks for a week or two, depending on whether there's a large snowmelt or a rainstorm. If a springtime thaw fills the tanks, the sludge could flush out of its system and flow into the Kennebec River without being properly treated, he said.

"It's a public health concern, a public health crisis," Champagne said. "It's a matter of time — not if, when — we'll be violating our [National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System] permit."

Casella blames two new state laws for its decision to accept less sludge. Last year, lawmakers passed a law to stop the spreading of treated sludge on agricultural fields after PFAS was found at numerous farms. The law change means that much of the sludge is now going to landfills.

A second law, which was passed last year and went into effect in February, restricts the importation of out-of-state waste into Maine. Casella cited this law change when it notified wastewater treatment facilities that it would be reducing its sludge pickups. The company says

this bulky waste is its preferred material to mix with the sludge to stabilize its disposal in the landfill.

“DEP has been in frequent communication with Casella to present multiple solutions to the problem,” David Madore, deputy commissioner of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, told the Bangor Daily News editorial board on Friday. These include identifying and locating potentially large volumes of bulking material in Maine that would be needed to safely continue to landfill sludge, working with Rep. Michael Soboleski, R-Phillips, and Rep. Scott Cyrway, R-Albion, to identify potential transportation options to haul these materials, and identifying landfills outside of Maine that may be able to accept sludge.

The company also was given permission by DEP to temporarily store sludge at a compost facility in Unity that the company owns.

Madore said that although Casella has indicated that its preference is to use demolition debris because it contains bulkier wastes, such as mattresses and furniture, to provide structure for landfilling sludge, “DEP will continue to work to identify both short-term and long-term solutions to this problem.”

Casella wants the state to delay enforcement of the out-of-state waste law to allow the company to bring in more bulk trash from out of state, or modify the law to give the company more time to find an alternative, company spokesman Jeff Weld said.

“There needs to be some balance here ... to avoid some of these unintended consequences by passing a couple of bills that are diametrically opposed,” Weld said. “We are starting to see that come to fruition. We are trying to stay ahead of it but we are quickly reaching a point where we need some relief.”

The current situation, with communities wondering if and when their sludge will be picked up, is untenable. With viable alternatives on the table, this problem can be alleviated in the short-term. Lawmakers, Casella, DEP, wastewater treatment facility operators and municipalities must quickly work together on predictable, reliable and cost effective ways to dispose of sludge for the longer term.

*Correction: An earlier version of this editorial misspelled Scott Cyrway's last name.*