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Change in state law needed to ensure safe sludge disposal

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

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John W. Casella is the chairman and CEO of Casella Waste Systems, Inc.

Last year, the Maine Legislature passed two bills – LD 1911 and D 1639 – that disrupted the way municipal wastewater treatment facilities manage biosolids or “sludge” disposal. LD 1911 ended the practice of land-spreading composted biosolids, forcing most of it into the state-owned Juniper Ridge Landfill, while LD 1639 cut off the safest and most effective way to bulk up that wet material when it is disposed at the landfill.

Since LD 1911 took effect in August, banning the beneficial reuse of sludge in Maine, more than 1,000 tons per month of additional sludge were brought to Juniper Ridge for disposal – a 15% increase.

Since LD 1639 took effect in February, the availability of oversized bulking waste, which is blended with sludge to ensure the landfill’s structural integrity, has fallen by roughly 14%.

Last month, our operating team acted quickly and decisively to avoid a potential catastrophe, and suspended sludge acceptance at the landfill for a brief period. This meant wastewater districts were forced to stockpile the material until an appropriate solution was created.

This wasn’t a hypothetical exercise. Six years ago, the Greentree Landfill in Kersey, Pennsylvania collapsed due in part to the placement of low shear-strength sludge, resulting in the tragic loss of a life and significant environmental damage. This is a sobering reminder of what can happen when the slope of a landfill fails.

This is why we argued alongside wastewater districts throughout the state against the simultaneous implementation of these two pieces of legislation. It’s why we believe a 24 to 36 month pause in the enactment of LD 1639 is crucial to averting a deeper crisis. If not, we

will continue to face the real possibility that our sludge cannot be disposed of safely.

Along with our wastewater district partners, we've navigated the impact of these new laws for the moment. But we haven't solved the broader problem, and if circumstances change with our current solution, we will be back to square one.

Activist groups such as Natural Resource Council of Maine, Don't Waste ME, Just Zero, Conservation Law Foundation, Slingshot, and Defend our Health have suggested that this is political gamesmanship. They insist that other materials can stabilize sludge in place of oversized bulking waste. While it is true that other materials can be used – and in fact are used at the Juniper Ridge Landfill – it is important to understand that each material has its own challenges.

One example, wood chips, is regularly theorized as a solution. But, in reality, we would need at least twice the amount of wood chips as compared to oversized bulking waste, consuming significantly more landfill capacity. If the goal of LD 1639 is to preserve that capacity for Maine waste, this would have the opposite effect.

Furthermore, environmental engineers are skeptical if it is feasible to add that much additional carbon-based material to the waste mix without creating unintended consequences, such as fires. And, since there is a beneficial use market for wood chips with availability fluctuations throughout the year, the costs would exceed the current price being paid by wastewater districts to export sludge to other disposal sites.

Even after detailed evidence of the disruption these two laws created, the vanishing disposal sites for sludge and the unsuitability of alternative bulking materials, people who have no practical ability to run a landfill continue to insist they know better. Sadly, there are legislators who believe them.

Our operators don't have the luxury of working in theories or playing political games. They operate in real time, with real consequences to their decisions, and they are the best in the business.

To be clear, we have no interest in revisiting the policy to end the spreading of biosolids in Maine at this time. However, the Legislature needs to provide the necessary time to allow the development of new technologies that reduce biosolids amounts before they are landfilled, and it needs to incentivize the deployment of new infrastructure that generates oversized bulky waste from sources within Maine.

We will continue to work to explore all options and welcome the opportunity to partner with any stakeholder in that effort. We would hope that our decades of environmentally responsible management of the Juniper Ridge Landfill, and the talented men and women who provide that service, can be a starting point for those discussions.