

A bill to change landfill rules passes in NH House, moves on to Senate

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Berkeley Parenteau stands in front of the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services during a rally against the development of a landfill near Forest Lake State Park.

A bill that would change the way landfills are approved in New Hampshire has passed in the state's House of Representatives and now moves to the Senate.

Right now, New Hampshire's rules require landfills to be at least 200 feet away from bodies of water. This bill would change that, basing the distance instead on how long it would take contaminated groundwater to travel from a landfill to a lake, river, or coastal body of water. It would ensure landfills would be far enough from bodies of water that it would take five years for contaminants to travel into the water.

Rep. Peter Bixby spoke in favor of the bill, saying it would protect the environment from leachate – also known as garbage juice – that could leak out of landfills.

“Siting landfills where only where they will not harm groundwater and surface water is an overriding principle for our state’s economy, our tourism and our health,” he said. “If a potential landfill site fails this principle, it should not get consideration.”

Bixby used the example of a controversial landfill proposal in the town of Dalton, saying the new rules would prevent it. That landfill, proposed by Casella Waste Systems, has caused divisions in the town.

“A gravel pit that would put a potential leak within six months of Forest Lake and within 12 months of the Ammonoosuc River should never be considered as a potential landfill site,” he said.

Opponents of the bill said present landfill requirements are sufficient, and the new rules were vague and would need more study.

Gov. Chris Sununu vetoed a similar bill last year, saying current rules were “rigorous and robust” and expressing worry that it would have curtailed the development of landfills.

About half of the trash in New Hampshire’s landfills is from out of state.

Another bill that would change how landfills are located in the state passed in the Senate earlier this month. Efforts to change landfill siting rules have been under consideration by state legislators since at least 2020.