

Landfill instability has Maine sewer plants in a bind



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Feb. 28—Maine sewer plants have been plunged into chaos over the last week because the state has run out of room to dispose of their sludge and some are only days away from overflowing.



"If a truck doesn't come for my sludge tomorrow, I'll have no choice but to dump it on the ground or discharge it into the ocean," said David Hughes, superintendent of the Scarborough Sanitary District. "It has to go someplace. It's not like we're going to stop making it."

The contractor who runs the state-owned Juniper Ridge landfill in Old Town announced last Thursday that it can no longer safely accept the growing amount of sludge being hauled there for disposal from Maine's wastewater treatment plants.

Juniper Ridge is getting too much wet, slippery sludge and not enough dry materials to bulk it up, such as dirt, wood, construction debris, or even garbage, according to Casella Resource Solutions. Without that bulk, the sludge could pancake and the landfill itself could collapse.

To maintain stability, Casella needs about five truckloads of dry waste for every one truckload of wet.

But two new state laws intended to protect the public from dangerous forever chemicals have collided to cause Juniper Ridge's stability problem: one that prohibits the composting or spreading of sludge over farm fields because of concerns about PFAS contamination and the other that bans out-of-state waste from Maine landfills.

Those laws have resulted in more sludge needing to be landfilled at Juniper Ridge, the one facility capable of accepting large sludge deposits, and less of the dry waste needed to bulk the sludge up for safe disposal, said Jeff Weld, Casella's director of communications.

Sludge deposits at Juniper Ridge are up 15 percent since the spreading ban was enacted in August, Weld said. That's an extra 1,000 tons of sludge per month. On the other side of the equation, the volume of dry waste available for bulking the sludge up is down by 14 percent.

"What we are seeing is the direct result of the passing of two diametrically opposed bills," Weld said.

In the short term, Casella is reducing the volume of sludge accepted at Juniper Ridge by 60 percent, or about 4,000 tons per month, Weld said. It is hard to predict the severity of the capacity shortfall in the future because Casella doesn't know how much bulking-up material it will get.

"Everything is an absolute mess," said Phil Tucker, superintendent of the York Sewer District.

In the meantime, Casella has told its municipal customers that it will truck their sludge to disposal sites in New Brunswick, Canada, but warned most of them that it is going to cost them a lot more. Those extra miles, and the extra time it takes to drive them, will mean fewer pickups.

Three years ago, Scarborough was paying Casella about \$200,000 a year to haul away its sludge, either to be composted at Hawk Ridge Composting Facility or landfilled at Juniper Ridge. But new laws that prohibited sludge composting or spreading doubled that cost.

The cost of hauling the sludge to Canada is now going to drive that cost up even higher to \$600,000 a year, Hughes said. To cover that, Scarborough is going to have to dip into its reserves, which is money usually saved for infrastructure repairs or equipment purchases.

Scarborough was expecting a truck to arrive to pick up its 30-ton trailer of sludge on Friday, but it didn't show up, Hughes said. Scarborough produces enough sludge to require a pickup every four days. Now two pickups behind, Hughes is running out of places to store it.

On Tuesday, Hughes called the lead developer of The Downs to say he could not sign any more sewer permits for the 1,000-unit, 524-acre property because Scarborough no longer had a viable long-term plan to dispose of the sludge it is already producing, much less any new sludge.

"I can't in good conscience take on any more capacity when I don't know what the hell I'm going to do with the sludge I already have," Hughes said. "I'm a day away from violation as it is, but let's make the problem even bigger. How do you explain that to an inspector?"

The backup has caused some minor disruptions at the Portland Water District, the state's largest. Last week, the district's Westbrook facility got three sludge pickups when it needed four. The East End facility is two truckloads behind, and the Wednesday pickup was canceled late Tuesday.

"As a utility, we're just trying to hold on," said Scott Firmin, director of the district's wastewater services. "This was all well-intended. Everybody is doing what they can to stabilize things. But as big as we are, we can only go two weeks at most before we are overwhelmed. "

COSTS ALSO INCREASING

Portland Water District's sludge management costs have gone up about \$1 million since 2020. Those are indirectly passed along to consumers when it increases what it charges the six communities it serves: Cape Elizabeth, Cumberland, Gorham, Portland, Westbrook, and Windham.

The district's size and its five-year sludge disposal contract with Casella insulate the six communities' ratepayers from any huge price spikes because of Juniper Ridge's stability issues, but Firmin said the problem isn't going away.

"I'm certainly concerned over price increases, but I'm more concerned about our long-term plans," Firmin said. "Even without the price protection, we still haven't gotten trucks every day. In two weeks, our plant will be overflowing. Canada doesn't feel like a long-term solution."

The state Department of Environmental Protection, which regulates landfill operations and much of the sludge cleanup associated with its former agency-licensed farm fertilizer program, is working with other facilities and waste transporters in Maine to find a solution, officials say.

"The department understands that Maine's wastewater utilities are in an untenable situation, and they are being forced to absorb huge price increases and try to avert disaster at their facilities," Deputy Commissioner Dave Madore said in a written statement on Tuesday.

"DEP is working with all interested parties to support a variety of temporary solutions to ease this crisis, while also developing plans to prevent this situation from recurring," Madore added.