

## OPINION

## Proposed landfill would pose threat to the Quabbin

*Facility would be 2.3 miles from the reservoir shoreline, 1 mile from the watershed*



by **RICHARD ROMANO** and **PHILIP LANDRIGAN**

1 day ago



Quabbin Reservoir

**THE QUABBIN RESERVOIR**, the main drinking water source for the city of Boston and for 2.5 million people in 40 cities and towns across Massachusetts, is under threat.

Quabbin is at risk of toxic pollution by a landfill proposed for Hardwick, a small town in central Massachusetts.

Holding roughly 400 billion gallons of drinking water, Quabbin is an environmental and economic treasure. It protects Massachusetts residents against deadly waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid that periodically ravaged the state before Quabbin's construction. It protects us against the toxic chemicals that contaminate drinking water across much of the United States.

Quabbin water is unique in that it is unfiltered. The pristine forests in the watershed surrounding the reservoir act as a natural filter. This results in pure water of exceptional quality. And because Quabbin water does need costly filtration, this produces huge savings for Massachusetts ratepayers.

But because Quabbin is unfiltered, it is fragile. If the reservoir became contaminated with toxic chemicals, filtration would be required, the health threat could persist for decades, and the costs could run to billions of dollars.

The proposed Hardwick landfill poses a grave threat to the Quabbin Reservoir and its water.

Casella Waste Systems, a \$4.5 billion, Vermont-based waste management company, proposes to build this large regional waste facility 1 mile from the boundary of the Quabbin watershed and 2.3 miles from the reservoir shoreline.

Casella wants to build the landfill near Quabbin because the company has been forced by court order to close a similar facility that it has operated since 2003 in Southbridge. That facility had to be shut down after it was found to have contaminated nearly 90 nearby wells with lead, 1,4-dioxane, and other chemical wastes.

The proposed waste facility in Hardwick would occupy the site of an old, illegally located landfill. That facility was closed by town vote in 2007 when elevated levels of the industrial solvent 1,1,2,2-tetrachlorethane and other toxic chemicals were discovered in nearby residential areas. The proposed landfill would be much larger than its predecessor.

While the proposed landfill would not sit directly within the Quabbin watershed, it would be dangerously close to the massive underground aqueduct that links Quabbin to the Wachusett Reservoir and thence to Boston. It would also be situated above a high yield aquifer that supplies water to the town of Ware. The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) has determined that the landfill could contaminate the aquifer serving Ware.

Yet another danger is that heavy trucks carrying waste to the Hardwick landfill would pass through the Quabbin watershed over winding, two-lane country roads and cross rivers and streams that feed the reservoir. A single overturned truck on a narrow bridge near the reservoir could contaminate Boston's water for decades.

Casella promises to exercise great care in operating the landfill. But the company's past record belies these claims. **Casella has a long record of contaminating air and groundwater** at multiple sites in many states. The recent episode in Southbridge is but the latest in a long string of such events. Casella has been sued many times, fined by multiple attorneys general, and left a trail of toxic pollution across New England.

Massachusetts lives with a legacy of water pollution. Old mills and plants polluted the Assabet, Charles, Nashua, Neponset, and Merrimack Rivers. But this toxic legacy is not confined to the past. PFAS, "forever chemicals" used widely in modern non-stick pans and water-resistant fabrics, have **tainted local water supplies** in recent decades. The price of this contamination is high. Littleton spent \$16 million to treat its drinking water for PFAS. In Barnstable, a

similar clean-up cost \$27 million. And Cambridge had to spend \$8.5 million to switch water supplies for three months while installing PFAS filters.

From the Industrial Revolution to the present, corporate and government promises to safeguard our drinking water have fallen short. Massachusetts can prevent that from happening again. The bottom line: The Hardwick landfill must be stopped. Casella has shown that it cannot be trusted. The landfill would be a disaster waiting to happen.

While many Hardwick residents are actively opposing Casella, the reality is that this town of 2,000 faces an uphill battle against the company's vast financial resources. For the sake of our water, they should not face it alone.

**Gov. Maura Healey, the Legislature, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, and the leaders of the 40 cities and towns that rely on Quabbin water must speak out against the Hardwick landfill.**

The MWRA and the Department of Conservation and Recreation, which manages the Quabbin watershed, must actively oppose the facility.

**Most importantly, the Massachusetts** Department of Environmental Protection must permanently remove the precarious Hardwick site from consideration for solid waste disposal.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts must act now to block this ill-conceived facility, preserve the source of pristine water for 2.5 million of our residents, and protect our public health.

*Richard Romano is a physician certified in emergency and family medicine and a resident of Hardwick. Professor Philip J. Landrigan is a pediatrician and the director of the Global Observatory on Planetary Health at Boston College.*