

Where's the Ayotte-Sununu environmental divide? Landfills and offshore wind, for starters

BY: CLAIRE SULLIVAN - NOVEMBER 13, 2024 5:00 AM



Residents of Dalton and surrounding communities raised concerns that pollutants from a landfill proposed by Casella Waste Management could contaminate Forest Lake. (Amanda Gokee | New Hampshire Bulletin)

Days before she was elected governor, Kelly Ayotte stood in front of Forest Lake, half a mile from where Casella Waste Systems has been fighting to build a landfill in the tiny northern town of Dalton.



David Rochefort

She stood alongside Littleton Republican Rep. David Rochefort, who had sponsored bills aimed at pausing landfill development in the state and stemming the flow of out-of-state trash that comes into New Hampshire at the pace of about 900,000 tons a year. Those bills died in the Senate, but last week, he won his campaign to join the upper chamber. He had been emphatic that things would be different with him working from inside the body.

The glistening water behind her, with clouds hanging low overhead, Ayotte sent a message on the proposed landfill starkly different from that of the incumbent Republican Gov. Chris Sununu, whom she often mirrored during her campaign. Though she shared many similarities with Sununu, who endorsed her, she departed from him during the campaign on some issues, like the Dalton landfill and offshore wind in the Gulf of Maine.

“Right across from this beautiful body of water is where there were plans to put a landfill,” Ayotte said to the camera for a video post. “Complete insanity.”

“Not gonna happen,” Rochefort chimed in.

“It makes no sense. This is a beautiful state park. People love this place,” Ayotte said. “I’m here this morning. It represents the beauty of New Hampshire, and this just defies common sense. We cannot let that happen.”

She ended the video with a promise: “Not happening on my watch.”

Ayotte’s vows to stop the new landfill in the North Country and to, as she captioned her video post, not “let our state be a dumping ground for out-of-state trash,” represent a shift in rhetoric on landfill issues from the top of the state Republican Party. In Sununu’s last campaign for governor in 2022, he struck a different chord. Asked in a WMUR debate if the state should allow the landfill to be built, his answer was “yes.”

“I was an environmental engineer,” Sununu said. “I used to design these systems. There are safe ways to do it.”

Earlier that year, Sununu vetoed a bill that would have tightened restrictions on siting landfills near water bodies, saying the existing regulations – which allow landfills just 200 feet from the water – were “rigorous and robust.”

This election, none of the candidates for governor supported the new landfill. Rochefort said he would be the “loudest” voice of any party in the Senate on trash issues; North Country voters have now given him that chance. Now the question is whether the change at the top of the party and an active voice within the Senate will be enough to move the chamber that has traditionally shot down those bills.

Community activists in opposition to the new landfill had been hopeful that the governor’s race, no matter who won, would mean a shift in state policy.

“We are thrilled to know that regardless of the election outcome,” Wayne Morrison, president of North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, said in a statement a month before the election, “we will have the opportunity to work with a Governor who understands the dangers of out-of-state waste and who shares our concerns about New Hampshire becoming the dumping ground for New England.”

The group, in its press release, said it would work with a bipartisan group of lawmakers on issues like properly managing leachate, the “trash juice” created when water flows through waste that has been an issue at several landfills around the state, and updating the 200-foot setback for landfills.

Lawmakers are already primed to revisit solid waste issues in the legislative session that begins early next year. A bipartisan group of representatives has put in a legislative service request for a bill “establishing a moratorium on the processing and approval of new landfills.” Those signed onto it include Republican Reps. Kelley Potenza, of Rochester, and Seth King, of Whitefield, and Democratic Reps. Nicholas Germana, of Keene, and Linda Haskins, of Exeter.

Ayotte at the helm may mean shifts on other issues. On energy, Ayotte shares Sununu's branding of an "all-of-the-above approach," but she has her differences.

For one, Sununu has described himself as a "champion of offshore wind." In 2019, he asked the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management to establish an intergovernmental task force on offshore wind in the federal waters off of New Hampshire. BOEM created a regional task force in the Gulf of Maine that included New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maine, and federally recognized tribes.



Gov.-elect Kelly Ayotte said she was open to wind generally but believed the offshore projects proposed in the Gulf of Maine weren't right for the state." (Will Steinfeld | New Hampshire Bulletin)

Sununu signed an executive order preparing the state for offshore wind development, establishing four advisory committees to help inform the state's representatives on the BOEM task force. He also ordered state officials to study the greenhouse gas emission reductions that could come from offshore wind and the port and coastal infrastructure of the state.

In an interview during her campaign for the Republican nomination, Ayotte said she was open to wind generally but believed the offshore projects proposed in the Gulf of Maine weren't right for the state. "Those proposals that are right now being considered don't make sense to me," she said, pointing to what she saw as a lack of "return on investment" and concerns from fishermen.

The week before the election, two companies bid nearly \$22 million to win the right to submit plans for four wind lease areas in the Gulf of Maine. While the Biden administration has pursued offshore wind, those proposals have been plunged into uncertainty by the reelection of former President Donald Trump, who has said he would end offshore wind on "day one."

In the Legislature, Republicans seem to be eyeing another source of energy: nuclear. A group of Republicans have signed onto a legislative service request for a bill "declaring the development of advanced nuclear energy

technology to be in the best interest of the state of New Hampshire and the United States.” Eight Republicans are listed as sponsors, including House Majority Leader Jason Osborne, of Auburn.