

Bethlehem landfill operators must pay \$1.9 million in penalties for trash violations

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Courtesy / NH Department Of Environmental Services

Part of the \$1.9 million penalty will go to remediating another former landfill, with the rest going to the state of New Hampshire.

A subsidiary of Casella Waste Systems has agreed to pay \$1.9 million in civil penalties for issues at their landfill in Bethlehem.

New Hampshire officials say their [agreement](#) with North Country Environmental Services, Inc. is the largest civil penalty in state history for violations related to waste management.

“Landfills are highly regulated and are designed and built to ensure safety to the public and the environment,” Attorney General John Formella said in a statement. “This case demonstrates our commitment to holding accountable those that violate our statutes and rules created for the purpose of protecting the State’s environment and natural resources.”

The company did not admit liability for the violations alleged in the settlement, which include disposing of trash beyond the permitted limits of the landfill, failing to maintain the system that collects liquid that leaches out of the landfill, and the existence of a hole in the liner of the landfill.

Part of the penalty will go towards a remediation project focused on the town of Bartlett's former landfill, with the rest going to the state.

Bethlehem Select Board Chair Nancy Strand said she was glad to see the company held accountable for the problems with their landfill. But, she said, the fine seemed like a slap on the wrist.

“I also am a little discouraged that there was no restitution to Bethlehem for the problems at the landfill in Bethlehem,” she said.

Casella has been trying to expand its Bethlehem landfill for several years. Strand said she fears the town may lose its control over that expansion if recent efforts to change the state's landfill siting process succeed in the state legislature.

The landfill has been divisive in town, Strand said, and it has been a lot of work preparing for the site to close down — work that would be undermined by an expansion of the landfill.

“We have worked really hard over the past five years to bring the town together,” she said. “They could pull the rug right out from under us. And we've spent years preparing for this and doing it so that we can make a transition to our own transfer station.”

This is not the only controversy over landfills in New Hampshire's North Country. Casella has also proposed a new landfill in the nearby town of [Dalton](#). State regulators rejected that proposal, but a [legal battle](#) over the site continues as waste companies continue arguing more [capacity](#) is needed for trash in New Hampshire.

Advocates who have been fighting against Casella's proposed expansions said the Attorney General's findings shed light on their concerns, but more action was needed.

Wayne Morrison, president of the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, said he saw the settlement as a recognition that Casella has had "pretty severe compliance issues."

"I think it's time for the state to recognize that this is not an operator that we should be entrusting with another permit," he said. "We've been fighting for quite a while to say, the state of New Hampshire does not need additional capacity right now. And on top of that, the entity asking for more capacity has pretty severe operating issues that are putting New Hampshire residents at risk."

Jeff Weld, Casella's vice president of communications, said the company has invested in improving operations at their Bethlehem landfill over the past two years.

"We have worked to address compliance matters at the site by improving our control and monitoring systems, and replacing our management team. NCES was constructed with redundant environmental safety

systems, and we believe that the data shows these systems did their job protecting the environment," Weld said in an email.

Weld said the landfill will be able to continue providing disposal capacity for more than 124,000 households and 11,000 businesses.