

https://www.unionleader.com/opinion/op-eds/adam-finkel-casella-should-provide-answers/article_a1a42dd3-c5f1-550b-bbdc-b8e6578a5ee6.html

Adam Finkel: Casella should provide answers

Oct 20, 2023



Adam M. Finkel

A TIRELESS activist has uncovered data that he believes proves that one of New Hampshire's three large solid waste landfills **is leaking** (NH Voices, Oct. 10). The author, Jon Swan, says that it's time for the Casella NCES landfill in Bethlehem to close. As a **professor of environmental science**, my inclination is always to amass as much information as possible before reaching a conclusion. So I have a different suggestion: it's time (long past time!) for a competent, unbiased group of experts to thoroughly investigate what's going on underneath and around this dumpsite.

It is indeed worrisome – and annoying – that 30 years after both the developer and the state Department of Environmental Services (DES) blessed the final excavation of the waste and soil in the old unlined portion of the NCES site, it is still being claimed that any contaminants found off-site are coming from that old portion.

This seems doubly bogus given that at least a couple of the specific PFAS contaminants found off-site (e.g., perfluorobutanesulfonate and 6:2 fluorotelomer sulfonate) **didn't even exist in commerce** when the old portion was closed!

There is no substitute for a planned, systematic site evaluation, to determine if and where the liners are leaking and how rapidly the plume(s) of **contaminated groundwater is (are) moving** towards and into the Ammonoosuc River. The scientific literature is clear that landfill liners are prone to both **sudden and gradual failures**. Pinpointing how and why this "state of the art" landfill may have failed will help many other communities as well as the beleaguered residents of Bethlehem.

Although I live in Dalton, near Casella's proposed greenfield site for its next landfill, there is no "bias" in calling for more study. My only recommendation, based on decades of experience as a scientist and senior appointee at EPA and OSHA, is that neither this developer nor DES can or should be trusted to study this problem themselves.

DES has acknowledged time and again that it lacks the time and expertise to do more than accept at face value, without any quality control, the data that operators provide. DES leadership even told a group of legislators and other stakeholders this August that "it's not our job to look at a landfill application and judge whether it's a good idea or not."

So consultants must be hired, and obviously the source of any identified pollution problem — not the state budget — must pay the bill.

In my opinion, the testimony in recent legislative hearings of the small "in crowd" of New Hampshire consultants unequivocally shows that they are "hired guns of low caliber," only interested in pleasing the developer who funds them and by any means necessary. I can specifically defend that appraisal anywhere, anytime. Just for one example, employees of various consulting firms supported a "giveaway" bill (SB 61, **voted down by a large House majority**) by arguing that the only "scientific" way to site a landfill is to let the developer decide what is the average speed of pollutant flow through the local soil. That's just like letting a ladder manufacturer use rungs that will break under 100 pounds of weight, because he gathered data from a group entirely made up of children to set the "average" weight of a person.

Fortunately, there are literally dozens of large, independent, top-quality **consulting firms** all over the country who could answer the compelling question Jon Swan has posed. If Casella Waste Systems doesn't step up very soon and provide "hands-off" funding for an independent study, I believe they will be guilty of a management and ethical failure on top of a possible engineering failure.

Adam M. Finkel is a clinical professor of environmental health sciences with the University of Michigan School of Public Health. He lives in Dalton.