

Casella withdraws permit applications for Dalton landfill opposed by some residents

New Hampshire Public Radio | By Mara Hoplamazian

Published June 3, 2022 at 11:48 AM EDT



Mara Hoplamazian/NHPR /

Berkeley Parenteau stands in front of the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services during a rally against the development of a landfill near Forest Lake State Park.

A controversial plan to build a new landfill in the North Country is halted for now, after Casella Waste Systems withdrew permit applications for the facility this week.

The proposed landfill near Forest Lake in Dalton has drawn strong opposition from local residents, who fear the landfill will harm the environment and economy in their community.

After state regulators declared the permit application incomplete, the company was given until June 1 to submit supplemental materials, withdraw their application, or have it denied by the state's Department of Environmental Services.

Casella withdrew its permit applications for the landfill, but said it plans to re-submit its proposal at a later date, and is still interested in siting a landfill in the Dalton area.

"These are some of the most challenging issues in public policy and environmental management," said Joe Fusco, vice president at Casella. "What kind of infrastructure are we going to build? Where is it going to be located? So these are not new challenges to us."

The company withdrew a wetlands permit application for the same site in December.

Room for trash

Fusco said the company is proposing the landfill because more capacity for solid waste disposal is needed in New Hampshire, projecting that New Hampshire wouldn't have enough capacity to meet the industry's demand for space over the next two decades.

But calculating how much space the state will need for solid waste in the next 20 years isn't that simple, said Mike Wimsatt, director of the waste management division at the Department of Environmental Services.

State regulators must determine if proposed landfills or expansions of landfills would have a public benefit,

which includes projecting the need for solid waste capacity over a long period.

“That is, by definition, a moving target,” he said. “Every time we receive and process a permit application for expansion of an existing landfill, then that picture changes.”

Wimsatt said the state has adequate capacity for trash right now, adding that “we don't perceive that we have a landfill capacity crisis, if you will. That's a word that gets thrown around a lot.”

Almost half of the waste in New Hampshire's landfills comes from outside of the state, and critics of the Casella proposal point out that the company may use the proposed Dalton site for trash generated outside of New Hampshire.

State legislation

For Wayne Morrison, president of the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, an advocacy group that opposes the Dalton project, Casella's application has opened the door to a broader set of conversations about waste management, highlighting issues like the state's out-of-date solid waste plan.

“We're not anti-landfill, we're not anti-business. What we are is... concerned about doing it the right way and that our protections, our laws, our regulations in many cases need to be updated,” he said.

Morrison's organization has supported a legislative effort to change a rule governing how far away from a body of water a new landfill can be built.

Current rules say landfills need to be 200 feet away from bodies of water, but the new method would be based on the amount of time it takes for groundwater, which could be contaminated by leaks from the landfill, to reach a river, lake, or ocean.

That bill has moved through both the House and the Senate, and now awaits a decision from Gov. Chris Sununu. If the bill becomes law, landfills would need to be far enough away that contaminated groundwater would take more than five years to seep into a water body.

Opponents of that legislation say it's targeted at halting Casella's proposed project. But others, like Adam Finkel, who owns a home on Forest Lake near the proposed landfill, say it just prohibits poor planning.

"It targets hideously inappropriate, cavalier, thoughtless site locations. And they just happened to have one," he said.

A separate bill that would prohibit regulators from issuing new solid waste permits until the state's solid waste plan is updated has also passed through both legislative bodies.

In Dalton, residents are gearing up for a special election on June 7 to decide if the town should adopt a zoning ordinance, which some hope would give locals more say in Casella's plan.

"Whether you're for the landfill or not for the landfill, zoning will help you either to prevent the landfill from going in or will give you more power if you want to negotiate as the host community with the applicant,"

said Wayne Morrison, who lives in neighboring Whitefield, which also borders Forest Lake.

In the past, local opponents have raised concerns that zoning would infringe on property rights and have negative effects on the town's economy. Residents adopted temporary zoning rules in 2019, and those rules have been extended through this year.