

# Gardiner officials consider consequences of sludge crisis

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By Jessica Lowell

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John Leslie, market area manager for Casella Waste Systems, speaks Wednesday to the Gardiner City Council about current restrictions across Maine on handling sludge from wastewater treatment plants that can no longer go to a state-owned landfill north of Old Town. *Jessica Lowell/Kennebec Journal*

**GARDINER** — As Gardiner officials begin to consider spending priorities for the next budget year, they will be looking at the sudden and unexpected spike in wastewater treatment costs facing plants across Maine.

Last week, the contractor that operates the state-owned landfill that has been taking biosolids from wastewater treatment plants announced it could no longer accept the increased amounts that have been shipped there.

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The reason, officials with Casella Waste Systems said, is it does not have access to the types of demolition waste debris that had been used to bulk up the sludge so it could be stored safely.

They said two state laws have created this situation. One banned the surface application of sludge and composted products made from sludge over concerns of PFAS contamination. The other restricts the amount of out-of-state bulky waste — including construction debris used to stabilize sludge — that can be brought into Maine.

The second law went into effect Feb. 8.

“The situation is changing, and it’s going to change rapidly,” Douglas Clark, Gardiner’s director of wastewater, said. “This is a snapshot today.”



A dumpster full of dewatered sludge is seen Tuesday at the city’s wastewater treatment plant in South Gardiner. *Joe Phelan/Kennebec Journal*

On Wednesday, two officials from Casella Waste Systems gave an update to the Gardiner City Council.

“We’re in a crisis situation,” John Leslie, market area manager for Casella, said.

Because of the ban on land application and composting, Leslie said, the amount of sludge headed to the Juniper Ridge Landfill, which Casella operates, has increased.

“We’re doing everything we can to find new outlets, but they are hard to come by,” he said. “Sometimes, they take years to develop.”

For now, the company is trucking sludge to its Hawk Ridge Compost facility in Unity. From there, it is shipped at added cost to a landfill in New Brunswick, Canada, thanks to emergency action by the Maine Department of Environmental Protection over the weekend to allow that to happen.

Leslie said his company continues to work with the state DEP on short-term fixes, and he urged city officials to contact their state legislators and Gov. Janet Mills to ask for relief.

“I think we’re still in a very dicey situation,” he said. “We’re asking for help to take in more bulking agent at the landfill so we can create a safer environment for landfilling of Maine’s biosolids.”

Leslie said his company has been contacting its customers to determine those that can store biosolids for even a short time and those that need sludge hauled immediately.

George Belmont, facility manager at Hawk Ridge, said this sort of triage delays the shipping schedule, but does not solve the problem.

In Gardiner, wastewater treatment is run as an enterprise fund, which means the costs of treating wastewater are borne by the ratepayers.

Over the years, city officials have secured millions of dollars in federal funds to make capital improvements to the plant to treat sewage and prevent it from flowing into the Kennebec River, in violation of the federal Clean Water Act.

Gardiner City Manager Andrew Carlton said the need exists for a rate increase for wastewater treatment.

“There’s just no choice,” he said. “We’re looking at a 30% to 50% increase in the cost for hauling sludge. Unfortunately, we don’t have the revenue stream to keep up with that.”

Across the state, wastewater treatment plant operators are struggling to find options now that the collection of biosolids is limited and increasingly expensive.

Some are able to store the sludge in overflow tanks, but that is a short-term solution and one that can put an operating license at risk.

Gardiner is able to store biosolids for four days.

“Storing the sludge outside would clearly violate our license,” Clark said. “The same state that excluded us (and) shut us out of the landfill or any other viable alternative will turn around and come down and ding us with a consent decree for being out of compliance.”

“What happens if we hit that four days and we’re not able to get pickup?” District 3 City Councilor Colin Frey said.

Clark said there was one option he had yet to investigate: Taking sludge to a plant at the Anson-Madison Sanitary District. He said could not guess how much that would cost.

“I stopped asking a couple of weeks ago how much does it cost?” Clark said. “What I’m asking now is: ‘Can you take my stuff? Can you come Thursday morning and pull my dumpster?’”

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