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Maine calls out landfill operator's 'disappointing' response to looming sludge crisis

by **Michael Shepherd** and **Sawyer Loftus**

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Phil Besse shakes the separators on a machine used in the dewatering process of waste at the Bangor Wastewater Treatment Plant on Main Street on March 1, 2023. Credit: Linda Coan O'Kresik / BDN

AUGUSTA, Maine — Maine officials criticized a key landfill operator on Monday for rejecting proposed solutions to a looming crisis of contaminated sludge piling up at water treatment plants.

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection, waste treatment districts and lawmakers are still scrambling to find places to put the sludge after Casella Waste Systems told waste plants across the state last month that the Old Town landfill operated by the company could no longer bear the amount of sludge tainted with “forever chemicals” that is flowing in.

More than 30 wastewater districts are now warehousing sludge and could be one or two weeks away from capacity. If they hit it, sludge would be discharged into rivers, adding an environmental emergency atop the emerging public health crisis around per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances — or PFAS — being found increasingly in water, soil and food.

The state either needs more debris to contain the sludge or for out-of-state landfills to take it. Neither is an option currently, and a DEP spokesperson called Casella's posture “disappointing” in a Monday email that amounted to the state's first criticism of the Vermont-based company.

"From what I understand, they have been exploring options all the way from Canada to Ohio and Arkansas, and so far, they're running into dead ends," Amanda Smith, Bangor's water quality director, said after wrapping up a call with state officials.

Casella considers the problem to be a large one that the state, cities and towns and private companies must solve, company spokesperson Jeff Weld said. While the company is open to "viable solutions," he said none proposed so far are sustainable ones.

"Trucking small quantities of material over long distances that take up more disposal capacity is not a long-term solution," Weld said.

Although the Juniper Ridge Landfill in Old Town is owned by the state, the operating agreement Maine signed with Casella in 2004 gives the company complete control over the facility's operation. The company has said it prefers bulky materials and construction debris which used to steadily flow into the landfill from another facility in Lewiston.

That waste largely came from out of state and was allowed to be dumped at Juniper Ridge through a loophole in Maine law closed last year against Casella's wishes and in response to years of activism. After that, Maine passed a pioneering bill banning sludge spreading due to PFAS' links to health problems from cancer to high blood pressure.

The environmental groups behind the changes argue they will benefit Maine in the long run, though Casella has argued the laws exacerbated this problem. The company said that it has found a way to mitigate short-term capacity problems, but the waste it needs to contain sludge will not be consistently available in Maine.

Reps. Scott Cyrway, R-Albion, and Michael Soboleski, R-Phillips, the lawmakers working with the department to arrange trucking and other potential solutions to the sludge issue, echoed concerns with legal changes in a Monday statement.

Soboleski praised the work of Gov. Janet Mills' administration ahead of a DEP briefing with the environmental committee on Wednesday. He said he could not judge Casella's work so far since he has not talked to its staff, but that he expected to hear from them this week.

"I'm looking forward to hearing them say that they are being a good corporate citizen and they're doing what's right for the people of the state of Maine," he said.

Correction: Casella does not own the Lewiston facility where it processes waste.

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