



Municipalities seek to avoid 'crisis' as landfill reduces acceptance of sludge

Maine Public | By [Kevin Miller](#)

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Construction and demolition debris that's been deposited in an active section of Juniper Ridge Landfill.

The private company that runs Maine's largest, state-owned landfill said it can no longer accept millions of pounds of sludge per month, forcing municipalities to change operations to avoid a potential environmental "crisis" as waste builds up at treatment plants.

Casella Waste Systems said this week that it has to reduce sludge deliveries to Juniper Ridge Landfill by 2,500 to 4,000 tons a month — or 5 million to 8 million pounds — in

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officials said the shift was necessitated by two new environmental laws – including one at the center of the state’s response to PFAS pollution – that simultaneously increased sludge shipments while decreasing the volume of bulkier waste that is needed to offset the more liquid sludge.

"There needs to be some balance here . . . to avoid some of these unintended consequences by passing a couple of bills that are diametrically opposed," said Jeff Weld, a spokesman for Vermont-based Casella. "We are starting to see that come to fruition. We are trying to stay ahead of it but we are quickly reaching a point where we need some relief."

Municipal officials, meanwhile, are raising the alarm.

"If the crisis goes unsolved, depending on the weather . . . we would have a human health crisis and an environmental crisis," Amanda Smith, Bangor's director of water quality management, told city councilors this week.

Smith said Bangor's treatment plant has already been forced to scale back its process for removing water from sludge before it is trucked out for disposal. She told city council members that the facility can probably manage the situation for about two weeks in dry weather but, much longer than that, the city risks violating its environmental discharge permits.

"What happens if we don't remove those solids from the system is that the biological system will fail and that wastewater will not be properly treated before it hits the Penobscot River," Smith said.

Just before Earth Day last year, Gov. Janet Mills signed into law two bills that had strong support from environmental groups.

The first, LD 1911, effectively ended the long-standing practice of spreading treated sludge as fertilizer or using it to make compost amid growing concerns about contamination with the "forever chemicals" known as PFAS. Several farms have been forced to close due to PFAS pollution linked to past fertilization with sludge and dozens more are contaminated along with hundreds of neighboring wells.

The second bill signed by Mills, LD 1630, [closed a perceived loophole](#) on the disposal of
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construction and demolition debris imported largely from Massachusetts as the “bulking agent” to combine with more liquid sludge. But the new law, which took effect this month, has reduced the volume of that bulky waste by 14% even as sludge deliveries to Juniper Ridge have increased by 15% monthly, according to figures provided by Casella.

The company also informed many wastewater treatment plants over the past week that its per-ton transportation fee for sludge will increase significantly because some of the waste will now have to be hauled elsewhere than Juniper Ridge.

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection recently granted Casella temporary authorization to stockpile sludge at its Hawk Ridge facility in Unity for eventual transport elsewhere.

DEP spokesman David Madore also said that the department is “working with other facilities and waste transporters in Maine to establish similar arrangements.”

“DEP understands that Maine’s wastewater utilities are in an untenable situation, and they are being forced to absorb huge price increases and try to avert disaster at their facilities,” Madore said. “DEP is working with all interested parties to support a variety of temporary solutions to ease this crisis, while also developing plans to prevent this situation from recurring.”

Portland Water District has also been forced to stop producing so-called “biosolids” — the industry term for treated sludge — at its East End facility and was waiting to send out several full loads of treated sludge, said director of wastewater services Scott Firmin.

Like Bangor, Portland Water District has some capacity and the facilities are designed to absorb a certain amount of disruption. But Firmin said he hopes these are short-term because the waste will keep flowing in regardless of the ability to treat and dispose of it. Like many wastewater programs, Portland used to spread sludge on farms or send it to Casella’s Hawk Ridge composting facility — two options now off the table under the new law.

“We’re seeing effects right now and I know others in the state are, too,” Firmin said. “And

Casella officials are already talking about changing the new law that limits the amount of out-of-state bulky waste that can be landfilled at Juniper Ridge.

But Sarah Nichols of the Natural Resources Council of Maine opposes that strategy. Nichols said she has been in communication with Casella representatives to find out more. But she said in an interview that landfills in many other states use other types of waste — including traditional household garbage — to bulk up liquified sludge.

"I'm just not convinced that the only solution is to bring in used, you know, couches and washing machines from Massachusetts to bulk this material," Nichols said. "I'm just not convinced this is the only path forward here."

Importation of out-of-state waste has been a contentious issue in Maine and other states for years. Federal courts have made clear that states can't entirely prohibit the importation because even garbage is considered a commodity under interstate commerce laws. But Maine can restrict its disposal of out-of-state waste at Juniper Ridge because it is a state-owned facility.

Nichols said Casella skirted that goal by re-designating debris from Massachusetts as in-state waste after it was processed the company's Lewiston facility. While she said protecting the structural integrity of Juniper Ridge is critically important, she suspects that Casella is choosing construction and demolition debris as that bulky waste for financial reasons.

"It's just I think that the business practices are influencing how they might want to engineer that to save the most money rather than to do the right thing for our towns and the state of Maine and our environment," she said.

In the meantime, towns are bracing for a sticker shock if Casella has to truck their sludge elsewhere for disposal — likely to Canada, where shipments of potentially PFAS-contaminated sludge from Maine has already caught the attention of government officials.

In a letter to Kennebunk Sewer District, Casella estimated that the fee will increase between \$61.49 and \$73.88 per ton. Meanwhile in Bangor, Amanda Smith said fees will have roughly tripled in just a few years and she estimated that sludge disposal costs

“That’s essentially eaten up 10% of our operating budget that needs to be available for things like replacing infrastructure . . . so it’s a real, real impact,” Smith said.

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