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NH, other states seek to keep Mass. trash out of landfills

By Christian M. Wade | Statehouse Reporter

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BOSTON — As Massachusetts sends more trash and construction debris out of state amid tightening solid waste regulations, neighboring states are weighing plans to curb the amount of outside garbage going into regional landfills.

The Bay State banned disposal of most construction and demolition debris several years ago, forcing contractors to look to neighboring states to get rid of waste from building renovations and other projects. Meanwhile, a number of landfills in the state have reached their capacity in recent years and had to shut down.

In 2019, Massachusetts exported nearly 2 million tons of the 5.5 million tons of trash it produced that year to other states, according to the latest data from the state Department of Environmental Protection. The amount of exported trash has risen every year since 2012, the data shows.

But now some states on the receiving end of the refuse are complaining about the amount of waste coming from Massachusetts and other states, which officials say are stretching already limited capacity at their landfills.

In Maine, lawmakers are considering a proposal seeking to reduce the amount of out-of-state waste going into the state-owned Juniper Ridge landfill by closing a loophole that allows debris from other states to be dumped at the facility.

Maine law restricts out-of-state waste, but the loophole allows the outside trash to be reclassified as Maine refuse if it is initially processed at a Lebanon recycling facility before heading to the Juniper Ridge landfill.

The state-owned facility, which is operated by Casella Waste Management, gets more than 90% of its construction waste from Massachusetts and other states.

“Massachusetts is engaging in environmental colonialism and we’ve let them,” said Maine state Sen. Rick Bennett, R-Oxford, a primary sponsor of the bill. “We bought Juniper Ridge specifically for the purpose of making sure Maine waste had a place to go ... but the loophole has allowed even more out-of-state waste.”

The proposal is opposed by solid waste, building and construction companies who say it would cost jobs and lead to the closing of waste processing facilities.

In New Hampshire, where nearly half of the trash going into landfills comes from Massachusetts and other states, officials are also looking to tighten the laws to restrict out-of-state trash amid warnings that the state will run out of capacity.

A 2019 report estimated that New Hampshire landfill capacity could have a shortfall of 120,000 tons in disposal capacity by 2025, which has state officials considering plans to expand landfill capacity and restrict waste from elsewhere.

While New Hampshire is also home to dozens of private landfills — which can’t be restricted from taking inter-state waste under federal commerce laws — lawmakers are looking at restricting out-of-state trash at municipal landfills.

The amount of trash going into Massachusetts landfills will decrease even further in coming years under the state’s new 10-year solid waste reduction plan.

The ambitious plan calls for cutting the amount of solid waste going into the state’s landfills by 90%, or an estimated 570,000 tons a year, by 2050.

It will ban the disposal of mattresses and textiles in landfills and reduce the amount of organic yard and food waste that businesses are allowed to dispose of to a half-ton per week. The current state limit is one ton a week.

Environmental groups say Massachusetts is making incremental progress toward reducing solid waste, but say it needs to aggressively expand recycling and reuse programs in order to meet its goal of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

They've been pushing the state to expand the list of banned landfill materials to include yard and food waste, which account for roughly 30% of what the state disposes of annually, and enforce a ban on throwing out paper, cardboard, glass, metal and other items that still collectively account for 40% of the solid waste.

Janet Domenitz, executive director of the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group, said efforts by other states to restrict out-of-state trash should be a wake-up call to state regulators to dramatically expand recycle and reuse programs.

“The vast majority of what goes into landfills and incinerators in the state can be diverted from the waste stream,” she said. “The reality is we don't have to invent anything to do it. We just need to aggressively build the infrastructure now.”

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