

No immediate solution to Maine's sludge problem

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By Penelope Overton

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David Hughes, superintendent of the Scarborough Sanitary District, expressed relief Wednesday after a tractor-trailer carted away 30 tons of sludge, but asked: “What about next time?” Scarborough is one of roughly three dozen Maine sewer plants that send sludge to Juniper Ridge, a state-owned landfill in Old Town that has sharply reduced the amount of sludge it is accepting. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

Supervisor David Hughes breathed a sigh of relief when a tractor-trailer rolled into the Scarborough sewer plant Wednesday morning to haul away 30 tons of sludge, clearing the way for the plant to resume normal operations and narrowly averting a potential public health disaster.

“I was hours away from having to pick a violation: a plant failure or a sludge dump,” Hughes said. “The truck showed up in time today, but what about next time? The driver couldn’t tell me when he’d be back. I can’t be holding my breath every couple of days.”

Hughes could fill the empty sludge trailer the driver left with the goopy, mud-like leftovers of the sewage treatment process by Friday. His backup storage tanks could hold another trailer full. He’ll be right back in the same situation if the sludge hauler doesn’t return Monday.

Scarborough is one of about three dozen Maine sewer plants that send their sludge to Juniper Ridge, a state-owned landfill in Old Town operated by a subsidiary of Casella Resource Solutions. Last week, Casella decided that it was no longer safe to bury all of that sludge at Juniper Ridge.

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Without enough dry material to bulk it up, the sludge will pancake and the landfill could collapse, Casella told its customers. To prevent that, Casella is cutting the volume of sludge landfilled there each month by 60 percent.

Casella is now trucking 4,000 tons of Maine sludge – which equates to about 130 truckloads – to New Brunswick, Canada. That is causing long, risky delays in between Casella's contracted sludge pickups and driving up disposal costs for most of Casella's clients.

Some Maine environmental groups claim that it doesn't have to be this way. They claim Casella didn't have to cut back sludge disposal at Juniper Ridge, doesn't have to truck Maine sludge to Canada, and isn't trying to look for sustainable long-term sludge disposal solutions.

"Casella is not being a helpful partner to the towns," said Sarah Nichols of the Natural Resources Council of Maine. "Casella didn't have to shut down Juniper Ridge. There are things I know they could do and probably a lot more that I don't. The question is: why aren't they doing it?"

For example, Casella likes to use oversized bulky waste to thicken up the sludge, which makes it safer to bury in the landfill, but a new state law that banned the landfilling of out-of-state waste has reduced the volume of Casella's preferred bulking agent by 15 percent.



An employee of Ferreira Trucking gets ready to head off after pumping a load of sewage sludge from Scarborough Sanitary District on Wednesday. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

But Nichols notes that oversized bulky waste is just one way to add structural stability to sludge. Other landfill managers use soil, gravel, woody debris, construction debris, and municipal solid waste to safely bulk up sludge – materials that Juniper Ridge is still receiving in abundance.

Casella could buy a tarp to cover the top of its landfill each night instead of using a new batch of soil to do it, Nichols said – soil that Casella could be used, and reused, to bulk up and safely bury more sludge from municipal wastewater treatment plants.

Nichols blasts Casella for using the sludge disposal fee hikes it is charging municipalities to lobby for an appeal of Maine's new laws that ban sludge spreading and out-of-state garbage from state-owned landfills instead of looking for a long-term solution to the forever chemical problem.

Maine banned the spreading and composting of sludge last year to prevent the continued spread of forever chemicals, a dangerous class of heat and water-resistant chemicals, in the state's drinking water, its farmlands, and locally grown food, game and fish.

The state is requiring public water and wastewater plant operators to test for these chemicals, or PFAS, which have been linked to cancer, kidney malfunction, immune system suppression, and pre-eclampsia in pregnant women. Full results won't be available until later this year.

In correspondence with its customers, however, Casella admits it is using some disposal fee hikes to build markets for Maine sludge – at least some of which is known to have unsafe PFAS levels – in states and countries with environmental laws that are not as strict as Maine's.

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“Moving forward, Casella will have to bear the considerable cost of developing new markets for the compost in southern New England, New York and Canada,” a Casella director wrote to the manager of the Brunswick Sewer District last May.

Nichols likens that approach to kicking the can down the road. Eventually, those states, or countries, will wise up, stop accepting the sludge of others and start adopting laws like Maine's to tackle the PFAS problem head-on, Nichols said.

A Casella spokesman was not available Wednesday afternoon to respond to Nichols' claims. On Tuesday, when contacted about Juniper Ridge's changing sludge policy, the spokesman blamed the difficult situation facing local sewer plant operators on the new state laws.

“What we are seeing is the direct result of the passing of two diametrically opposed bills,” he said.

It is unclear what happens to the U.S. sludge once haulers truck it to New Brunswick – in some provinces, sludge is still spread as fertilizer, while in others, it is burned or landfilled. Canadian and provincial officials did not respond to requests for information about sludge handling policies.

Three years ago, Scarborough was paying Casella about \$200,000 a year to haul away its sludge, either to be composted at Hawk Ridge Composting Facility or landfilled at Juniper Ridge. But new laws that prohibited sludge composting or spreading doubled that cost.

The cost of hauling the sludge to Canada is now going to drive that cost up even higher to \$600,000 a year, Hughes said. To cover that, Scarborough is going to have to dip into its reserves, which is money usually saved for repairs or equipment purchases.

Hughes had his eye on some new high-tech dryers that could possibly reduce how much sludge he must now send to New Brunswick. Until then, however, Hughes and other sewer plant operators are being forced to consider other options, like refusing to sign off on any new sewer hook-ups.

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