

Public hearing shifts focus to environmental agency's commitment

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Published: 9/6/2023 5:13:51 PM

Modified: 9/6/2023 5:11:43 PM

Jacquelyn Elliot, a former Granite Stater now residing in Maine, is worried the state's environmental agency is prioritizing

private economic gain over public safety.

“Waste is managed as a commodity which drives profits and incentivizes ever-increasing amounts of waste,” Elliot said during a public hearing Wednesday on expansion plans for Turnkey Landfill in Rochester. “In the whole process, the rights of citizens to breathe clean air, drink clean water and live in an environment that is relatively healthy - those rights are sacrificed in the name of economics and in the name of profits.”

She and others pointed out that waste operations in both New Hampshire and Maine are significantly swayed by profit-driven companies like Waste Management, which operates the Turnkey Landfill and imports waste from outside of New Hampshire.

The public hearing was held in response to concerns about air emissions at the landfill, which had received state approval for expansion in 2018. The purpose was to gather public input on the draft air permit regarding landfill gas emissions.

The Rochester landfill is the largest landfill in New Hampshire and the proposed expansion could bring in between 1,400,000 and 1,550,000 tons of waste annually from in and out-of-state.

Sheila Rydel, the air permitting program manager at DES, explained that the landfill's methane emissions were tested quarterly.

However, the department's decision to adhere to minimal federal regulations, despite having the capacity to measure more than just surface methane emissions, disappointed the public.

“Your mandate is protecting the health and life in this state and what EPA mandates for you is your jumping-off point. It's the narrow requirements of what you do but you are capable of generating standards higher than that,” said Susan Richman, a Durham resident and member of the town's solid waste advisory committee.

In a letter to the citizens who requested the public hearing, the department's air resources division said no regulatory requirements exist to assess cumulative air impacts, deeming them insignificant in the context of the landfill's application for an air emission permit.

The expansive site in Rochester, which is operated by a private subsidiary of Waste Management of New Hampshire, Inc., has proposed a plan to increase its disposal capacity and extend the lifespan of its 218-acre active landfill by adding another 60 acres. Three landfills exist at the site, but two are inactive and capped.

Landfill gas from all three landfills is collected to power engines and turbines through combustion. A portion of this gas is transported to a treatment plant at the University of New Hampshire.

Bonnie Christie, a resident of Hopkinton and a member of the town's solid waste reduction committee said if the department fails to consider the cumulative effects on the environment and public health, the initiatives undertaken by local municipalities may seem futile.

"So how do towns like ours, that are trying to manage our own waste have confidence that our work is not just for nothing," said Christie. "On the minimum make it impossible to just indefinitely continue to accept more and more waste."

Members of the public are requested to submit their written comments by September 13, following which the department's Air Resources Division will make a decision.