

N.H. secures settlement from landfill operator

By Amanda Gokee
GLOBE STAFF

New Hampshire has reached a \$1.9 million settlement with North Country Environmental Services, Inc. over alleged violations at the company's Bethlehem landfill, Attorney General John M. Formella announced Monday.

The settlement is the largest civil penalty ever obtained by the state for violations related to the New Hampshire Solid Waste Management Act, according to Formella.

"This case demonstrates our commitment to holding account-

able those that violate our statutes and rules created for the purpose of protecting the State's environment and natural resources," Formella said in a statement.

The settlement stems from a Jan. 9 civil complaint the state filed against North Country Environmental Services, which is part of Vermont-based Casella Waste Systems. The company has previously sought to expand its landfill capacity in New Hampshire's North Country by opening a new landfill in Dalton, a proposal that drew heated opposition and was rejected by the

state last year.

In its lawsuit, the state alleged that the company had placed significant amounts of waste beyond permitted landfill limits, caused leachate to leak into the environment, caused and failed to report a hole in the landfill's preliminary liner, and improperly drilled gas wells through one of the landfill's liners.

Those alleged violations spanned multiple years and are resolved through the settlement.

Of the \$1.9 million settlement, up to \$219,000 can go toward remediating erosion at a former landfill

site in Bartlett, N.H., where landfill debris had been emptying into the Saco River. The company is already undertaking that work, which is to be completed by Jan. 31, 2026, according to the settlement.

A spokesperson for Casella said the company has invested significantly in improving operations at the North Country Environmental Services landfill over the past two years.

"We have worked to address compliance matters at the site by improving our control and monitor-

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ing systems, and replacing our management team," Jeff Weld, vice president of communications, said in a statement.

He rejected the idea that the alleged violations had harmed the environment.

"NCES was constructed with redundant environmental safety systems, and we believe that the data shows these systems did their job protecting the environment," he said.

The landfill in Bethlehem provides disposal capacity for about 124,000 households and 11,000 businesses spanning 200 communities in the state, according to Weld.

Robert Scott, the head of New Hampshire's Department of Environmental Services, said the "significant and appropriate civil penalty" shows state regulators take landfill mismanagement seriously.

"Landfills are a necessary component of New Hampshire's integrated solid waste management infrastructure, and must be managed properly to protect public safety, human health, and the environment," he said in a statement.

Some environmental advocates in New Hampshire's North Country praised the settlement, including the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, an organization that has worked to protect the Ammonoosuc River watershed since 2008 and now advocates for statewide environmental issues.

"This enforcement action reinforces what we have long known, landfills leak, operators make mistakes and where these generational sites are located have serious and long term impacts on a community," Wayne Morrison, the organization's president, said in a statement.

Morrison said there are still concerns that the Bethlehem landfill could be allowed to expand, given legislation that recently passed the New Hampshire Senate (House Bill 707).

"We believe this pattern of non-compliance and lack of operational control demonstrates that Casella is an unfit operator for either a new landfill permit in Dalton or any further expansion in Bethlehem" said Tom Tower, vice president of North Country Alliance for Balanced Change.

"It's a huge change in attitude, and that's great," Adam M. Finkel of Dalton, a professor of environmental science and former chief regulator at OSHA, said of the settlement. He compared the latest penalty to prior fines against the landfill totaling only \$2,000.

But Finkel questioned the relevance of an environmental remediation at an unrelated landfill site located 30 miles away from Bethlehem.

"From the point of view of Bethlehem, it's a huge fine for that site, and then the remediation is occurring elsewhere," he said.

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