

Ayotte endorses a one-year landfill moratorium. Is that enough for New Hampshire?



Conway public works staffer Tim Shackford gets ready to dump of dirt over the garbage in the city landfill on Wednesday, January 18, 2023. GEOFF FORESTER

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New Hampshire is hitting pause on new landfill projects at least for a year – a move that environmental advocates and legislators say is long overdue.

This moratorium announced by Gov. Kelly Ayotte on Thursday could block Casella Waste Systems’ plans to build and operate a landfill in Dalton, near Forest Lake. The project has been under fire for over six years, with critics warning that it could contaminate water sources and harm the environment.

“I think we should take a look at projects across the board and make sure that they’re right for New Hampshire, making sure that we’re protecting the beautiful environment of New Hampshire,” said Ayotte. “It’s not just about one project. Let’s take a moratorium and look at all these projects.”

The moratorium will be part of House Bill 2, which is the policy section of the state budget and will also introduce a new siting proposal that would allow the community to have a say when these projects come up.

If approved by the legislature, the moratorium would kick in on July 1, once the budget passes.

New Hampshire currently has six operating landfills.

The largest, Turnkey Landfill in Rochester, is the biggest in New England and accepts waste from other states, with Bethlehem’s North Country Environmental Services landfill doing the same.

A 2020 state report revealed that [nearly half of the waste dumped in New Hampshire comes from out-of-state](#), much of it from Massachusetts.

Tom Irwin, Vice President for New Hampshire at the Conservation Law Foundation, called the moratorium “a much-needed step” toward protecting the state’s communities and environment.

“For too long, our state has been burdened with out-of-state waste, leading to harmful pollution,” said Irwin “While this is a significant first step, more work remains. It’s essential that we prioritize waste reduction and implement innovative solutions to ensure that waste disposal is only a last resort.”

Environment advocates are still concerned that one year might not be long enough for the state to put safeguards in place, especially with [lobbyists hard at work](#) in Concord on behalf of the billion-dollar waste industry.

“I think there’s reason to be skeptical that one year may not be enough and if it’s not enough, then we would hope that that moratorium would be continued until the state is in a position to properly regulate landfills, landfill siting and also be in a better position to advance waste reduction strategies,” said Irwin.

It took the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services over a year just to update its solid waste rules. Examining waste reduction strategies, the impact of landfills on communities and revising landfill siting rules could take far longer—and may be nearly impossible to tackle in just one year.

Michael Wimsatt, waste management division director at Department of Environmental Services said the agency is supportive of the one-year moratorium on new landfills.

“This will give the time for establishment of a landfill site evaluation committee that fully considers the impacts of landfills on communities that is beyond NHDES current rules and regulations,” Wimsatt said in an email statement.

State Rep. Kelley Potenza said she’s grateful that landfill issues are on Ayotte’s radar and hopes legislators can work with her team to address the state’s solid waste challenges. However, she also noted that New Hampshire may need more than a year to tackle the issue effectively.

“What she said today was fantastic,” said Potenza, a Rochester Republican. “We’re hoping that we can actually have it be a real pause so we can get a lot of different things and bring new technologies into New Hampshire.”

She said it would be a better option for [House Bill 171, which calls for a landfill moratorium until 2030](#), to become law than have a one-year moratorium.

After the landfill moratorium announcement, State Rep. Nicholas Germana pointed out that Ayotte’s approach marks a sharp contrast to former Governor Chris Sununu, who was often unclear about what he would support or oppose with his agencies.

“The folks in the DES, I think are there because they care about the environment and they want to protect the environment,” said Germana, a Keene Democrat. “I think there were political pressures there before, and my sense is that they are happy to have such clear messages from the governor that she now wants to do something about this.”

“It is very clear that she stands on the side of making sure that we don’t become the dumping ground,” he said.