

20100511LandfillOverview

The Trash Tracking Network is based in a multi-year community based effort sparked by the imposition of a huge "special waste" landfill in Old Town, Maine. This facility, the Juniper Ridge Landfill (formerly West Old Town Landfill) was established by a special act of the Maine legislature as its last bill of the 2003 session. It is the first state-owned landfill in Maine, and is operated under a 30-year agreement by a subsidiary of Casella Waste Systems of Rutland, Vermont.

Juniper Ridge currently accepts approximately 600,000 tons of municipal solid waste, incinerator ash, construction and demolition debris, contaminated soils, and sludge from sewage facilities. Already licensed at nearly 70 acres over which waste will be piled 200 ft. high, totaling 10 million cubic yards of waste, an expansion permit application is underway that has been temporarily blocked by Maine's Department of Environmental protection. Though less than one third filled in terms of its current capacity, the expansion would triple the licensed capacity, to 30 million cubic yards.

The public has been at a great disadvantage throughout the landfill development process. Originally licensed as a "special waste" facility in 1993, the public was told that the facility would be strictly limited to accept sludge from the pulp and paper mill run by Georgia-Pacific in Old Town. During its first 10 years of operation (1993-2003) this facility accepted a total of 300,000 tons of mill wastes, just half of what is being brought in per year at this time.

Many issues have concerned the public during this process. Though this landfill was established under state ownership specifically to allow exclusion of trash from non-Maine sources, several loopholes in Maine's laws were known to the operators and regulators (but not to the public) that allowed the "residues" from industrial processes to be re-classified as Maine waste. Large volumes of non-Maine waste in the form of construction and demolition debris and sewage sludge potentially will fill this landfill at rates up to a million tons a year.

This waste arrives in oversize, 100,000 lb. trucks that have recently received special permit via Federal legislation to travel the interstates of Maine. Before this, these trucks were required to travel on secondary roads and over Main Streets of many Maine communities. Landfill gases have become a serious public nuisance for residents living near to the landfill, and ground and surface waters are threatened with long-term harm. Legislative and regulatory controls are being crafted to address the out-of-state waste and odor problems.

Along with these serious environmental and policy concerns is a troubling pattern of "information imbalance" that has been part of this process. The public has been given partial and misleading information about this project from the start. A landfill advisory committee established by the legislature was never informed about significant changes to the operating agreement. Basic information about origins and volumes of wastes entering the landfill has not been forthcoming.

The Trash Tracking Network aims to fill in the gaps in available public information. Many freedom of information access requests have been filed with the state, and a large archive of documents and media files related to this project have been assembled. Direct observation of trash trucks traveling illegally on Maine roads has led to stiffer state enforcement of truck laws. Future plans include direct examination of truck logs and manifests, and observation of trucks entering Maine from more southerly New England states.