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Bethlehem

Landfill finds contaminant leaks

Company denied breach for months

By CHELSEA CONABOY Monitor staff October 25, 2009

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Operators of a large commercial landfill in Bethlehem have found leaks in the containment systems meant to prevent contaminants from escaping into groundwater. That acknowledgement comes after months of denials that such leaks were possible.

North Country Environmental Services, a subsidiary of Casella Waste Systems, has stayed a lawsuit against the state that said the Department of Environmental Services could not deny its application to expand the landfill based on a "hypothetical liner leak."

The landfill is the subject of a long-running battle by a group of Bethlehem residents who have encouraged the state to close it. They say the landfill operators have been deceiving them about the cause of contamination. They want the state to take a more skeptical look at what the company does in the future.

Monitoring wells around the landfill have shown elevated levels of volatile organic compounds and a compound that is added to the landfill to trace leaks. Company representatives repeatedly said the containment system was intact. They said the elevated contaminant levels were due to spills of leachate - the liquid that drains from the landfill - as it was loaded onto trucks to be taken to waste treatment facilities.

The landfill has a capacity of 4.5 million cubic yards of waste, and the company

wants to add capacity for more than 1 million more cubic yards. The state denied two expansion applications, one in December and one in February, saying there was no evidence the liner wasn't leaking.

Because of the rejections, General Manager Kevin Roy said that he has cut the staff to seven from 13 and that the landfill is taking in about half of the waste this year as it handled last year.

At that rate - about 80,000 tons per year - the landfill will be full within three years, he said.

In early September, the company reported to DES monitors that it had found leaks in the containment systems where the plastic cap over closed portions of the landfill meets the plastic liner beneath it.

Roy said equipment had hit the cap, causing damage. Storm water running down the landfill over that area picked up the leachate. Mike Wimsatt, director of the state Waste Management Division, said the cap had not been heat-sealed to the landfill liner in another area. In addition to leachate escaping, landfill gas was migrating to those areas where the cap was compromised and escaping into the ground.

Roy said the leaks were in an older portion of the landfill and are being fixed. He said there is still no evidence that the landfill's double liner system beneath the landfill is malfunctioning.

He said the company monitors the flows of leachate in the system and has not seen any increase.

"We understood the concerns of the state," Roy said. "We definitely understand the concerns of the citizens of Bethlehem. We are addressing these concerns as they appear to us."

The company is preparing a report on the leaks and a remediation plan for the state. Wimsatt said he also wants the company to come up with performance standards, or a set of conditions under which the state can determine whether all leaks have been identified and monitored properly.

"We theorized that there might be a leak, and sure enough, there was," Wimsatt said. "Whether or not it means they've identified everything that might be a problem, I think it's too early to know that."

Jeanne Robillard, chairwoman of the board of selectmen, said the town's engineer will review the data and make recommendations to the state. She said it is unnerving that North Country Environmental Services repeatedly denied a leak when one existed.

"I think it really comes down to credibility," she said.

Seth Goldstein, a Bethlehem resident and landfill opponent, said he would like to see the state hold the company responsible for what he sees as deceit.

"There's a pattern of misinformation and generalizations that are purposely being made to mislead the general public and DES," Goldstein said.

Less than 1 percent of the waste handled at the landfill comes from the town.

The rest comes from other areas of New Hampshire and out of state.

Should the issue be resolved, Wimsatt said, the company would have to submit a new application for expansion. That would trigger a new public review process, he said.

Bethlehem Landfill Operators Find Pollution Leaks

By Amy Quinton

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Teaser:

North Country Environmental Services, the company that operates the Bethlehem landfill, says its found pollution leaking in the system

Synopsis:

The owners and operators of the Bethlehem landfill say they have discovered pollution leaking in the system. The D-E-S denied North Country Environmental Services, a subsidiary of Casella Waste, a permit to expand last December in part because of groundwater contamination. North Country Environmental Services took the state to court over the issue. As New Hampshire Public Radio's Amy Quinton reports, the case has now been put on hold.

Transcript:

Officials at the Bethlehem landfill say that they discovered the problem in late August this year. General Manager Kevin Roy says that a cap buried in the old landfill had holes in it. 2:01 "there were areas of the cap that were compromised, they had gone into that area several times over the years to do some work, and the cap had been hit you could tell there were areas where it needed to be fixed." Roy says landfill gas escaped, which contaminated the soil. He says the leak was located at the junction of the cap and the liner. DES waste management director Mike Wimsatt says in addition, leachate, which is the liquid that contains contaminants from the waste, escaped as well. 1:12 they did identify a location on the lower portion of the cap over the facility that allowed that leachate to leak into a down chute that conveyed normally clean stormwater from the facility into a detention pond. The company applied for a permit last year to expand their landfill. But the D-E-S had denied it in part because they found volatile organic compounds or VOC's in monitoring wells at the site. 2:43 and in fact what this revelation suggests is that we were absolutely correct about that 2:51 Wimsatt says the DES is expecting a detailed written report from the company and their consultants to identify just what they found and what

steps they've taken to correct the leaks. □ Landfill General Manager Kevin Roy says they've already taken care of all the problems. □ 4:59 what we did and what the report will show that we went in and found those imperfections, repaired it, certified it, and buttoned everything back up. □ But residents in Bethlehem who have opposed the landfill expansion remain distrustful. □ 7:17 "I think it speaks to company's credibility." □ Selectwoman Jeanne Robillard. □ 5:00 I don't believe that is the only problem and certainly if there is a leak of this magnitude that would have caused these VOC's and bromide levels in one section that they weren't aware of, what's to say there aren't more. □ Robillard says that North Country Environmental Services has long argued that contaminants in the test wells were caused by isolated leachate spills from old tanks in the landfill and not a leak in the landfill liner. □ After the company was denied the permit from DES, it filed a lawsuit, against the state. □ The argument then was the liner was not causing the contamination. □ The company still holds that to be true. □ 2:54 "It wasn't the liner itself, it was the cap, in a closed section of the landfill" □ It's a point of contention between landfill opponents and owners. □ But whatever the case, North Country Environmental Services has stayed its court case against the DES. □ Roy says he expects future monitoring reports to show that contaminant levels are decreasing. □ 18:07 we believe that to be true because now that we've cleaned all that up and made these repairs we're seeing the trending continue to go down, matter of fact there's some VOC's that are completely gone. □ When the DES denied the landfill expansion permit last year, they required the company to come up with a plan to find the leaks and fix them. □ The DES says correcting the most recent discovery will now be part of that plan. □ For NHPR news, I'm Amy Quinton.