New Hampshire recycling study spotlights challenges and opportunities

Committee recommends legislation to update waste and recycling plans in the state.

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Led by New Hampshire State Rep. Karen Ebel, a legislative committee decided to study the state of recycling programs in New Hampshire and the challenges faced by the state and municipalities running waste and recycling programs. The result of the study is a 27-page report, released Nov. 1, containing 39 findings and 23 recommendations to adopt legislation that supports waste and recycling infrastructure in the state.

According to the report, the state’s management, planning and education efforts around solid waste and recycling have “fallen far behind” due to deep budget cuts at the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services' (DES) Solid Waste Management Division.

“Our waste management and planning statutes are out of date. Virtually everyone who testified lamented the troubling lack of forward-thinking planning, technical assistance and education done by DES due to staff shortages,” the report says.

Financial challenges being faced by municipalities and the industry were the primary impetus for forming the study committee in July. Since forming, the committee has met 14 times and received testimonies from municipal facility operators, private landfill and incinerator operators, recycling organizations, composters, a plastic manufacturer and many other stakeholders. While the study includes many waste-related issues, the report also includes many findings and recommendations around recycling legislation, education and funding for programs.

One of the key findings of the study is that 50 percent of the solid waste disposed of in New Hampshire comes from out of state, contributing to an “evolving solid waste emergency” that the state is unprepared for. The report also found the DES’ former Planning and Assistance Section, which assisted municipalities with solid waste management issues, prompted recycling and composting programs throughout the state and updated the state’s solid waste management plan every six years, had been eliminated, except for the solid waste operator training coordinator, due to budget cuts.

As a result, New Hampshire is “incapable of responding to various challenges that have arisen” in the industry and “many municipalities feel they receive inadequate state direction,” according to the report’s findings. While other states are moving ahead with recycling and composting programs, the report says New Hampshire lacks a single-stream material recovery facility (MRF) and commercial food-waste composting facility.

The report recommends implementing several laws, including legislation to create a funding source based on a per ton disposal charge for waste that is landfilled or incinerated in the state and legislation that replaces the state’s 40 percent diversion goal with disposal reduction goals with “specified targets and timelines.” The report also encourages more collaboration between stakeholders, including the Vermont-based Northeast Recycling Council, and underlines the importance of education to improve contamination.

Among the recommendations, the committee says the state needs to “resume its leadership role in long-range planning, technical assistance and public education” efforts. The first step will be to establish a working group within the DES to update waste and recycling laws as well as rally support from lawmakers.

The committee recommends the group consider implementing disposal bans similar to what other states have, and it also recommends the group work to create domestic markets for the banned items, including food waste and various types of plastics.

In addition, the report recommends the Department of Administrative Services work with the state legislature to update state laws to reflect current solid waste and recycling challenges and opportunities.

“Decentralized waste disposal policies should be reviewed and adapted to improve currently centralized recycling efforts,” the report says. “The state should be a leader in the procurement of recycled products, waste reduction and recycling. This work should begin immediately.”

Read the full report here.

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