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NEWS

Investigation: NYC dumping more garbage than ever in Finger Lakes area



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Key Points

Nearly 30% of all trash generated in New York City is being buried in Finger Lakes landfills

State's 3 largest landfills are in region, the biggest just miles from Cayuga and Seneca lakes

While Cuomo blocked a trash incinerator in the region, he's not opposed to existing landfills

Critics blame trains carrying NYC garbage for odors plaguing Perinton and Macedon neighborhoods

Other people's trash is continuing to pile up in the Finger Lakes at an astonishing rate — especially trash from New York City, which has tripled its exports of garbage to the scenic region in just five years.

Three landfills within 30 miles of one another, in Monroe, Ontario and Seneca counties, are now the state's largest.

In 2013, the *Democrat and Chronicle* declared the Finger Lakes to be New York's dumping ground after an analysis showed that half of all trash buried in New York state was going to large landfills in this region.

Five years later, it's worse.

Burial is up 37 percent at three huge Finger Lakes landfills, according to a new *D&C* analysis of state solid-waste reports, and the quantity arriving from far-off counties has

risen from 2 million to 3 million tons a year.

Nearly 30 percent of all the trash generated in America's largest city now finds its way to the picturesque, tourist-rich Finger Lakes region.

Data such as that infuriates many residents and business owners in the region.

"Upstate New York should not be a dumping ground for downstate," said Gary McNeil, a spokesman for Fresh Air for the Eastside, which formed around the issue of strong odors at the High Acres landfill in Perinton and Macedon, Wayne County.

Opposition to the perceived environmental and aesthetic impacts of the Finger Lakes landfills has grown in recent years, driven in part by winery and vineyard owners, farmers, other businesspeople and residents who value the relatively unsullied countryside.

"We look at these landfills ... as abominations," said Doug Knipple, president of Finger Lakes Zero Waste Coalition, the oldest of the groups that works to reduce the landfills' impact. "They're incompatible with the major economic drivers in the Finger Lakes."

Two months ago, Gov. Andrew Cuomo raised hopes that he agreed with the sentiment that trash and the Finger Lakes don't mix.

The context was a proposed trash incinerator in Seneca County, a concept that is widely disliked in the region.

The governor directed regulators to block the incinerator project, saying it was "not consistent with my administration's goals for protecting our public health, our environment, and our thriving agriculture-based economy in the Finger Lakes."

The governor's office estimates that the value of tourism alone to the region is worth \$1.7 billion annually.

"Importing and burning municipal solid waste in one of the state's most environmentally sensitive areas is simply not appropriate," Cuomo said.

Many Finger Lakes advocates groups praised Cuomo for his stance on the proposed incinerator. But some thought there should be more.

“As for the governor’s statement about the incinerator in the Finger Lakes, I definitely find this contradictory. Landfilling is just as detrimental to the Finger Lakes community as an incinerator would be,” said Valerie Sandlas, president of the Seneca Falls Environmental Action Committee.

Cuomo sees it differently, however.

In a statement to the *Democrat and Chronicle*, a spokesman for the governor said his continuing opposition to the incinerator project doesn't necessarily translate into opposition to the landfills next door.

"His administration ... will not support any waste project that is not fully protective of public health and the surrounding environment," spokesman Leo Rosales said. "The governor has championed the most stringent set of regulations in state's history to ensure all facilities operate in a safe and environmentally responsible manner without impacts to nearby communities."

Asked to clarify what that position meant for the landfills, Rosales reiterated that the governor would oppose any landfill expansion if it was not fully protective of health and the environment.

Largest landfills thrive on garbage from outside region

The state’s three largest landfills, measured by the tons of waste they received last year, are within 30 miles of one another.

Ontario County Landfill, third-largest, is five miles west of Geneva and of the head of Seneca Lake.

High Acres, second-largest, is on the banks of the Erie Canal at the southern edge of Monroe and Wayne counties.

Seneca Meadows Landfill, the largest in New York, is between the villages of Waterloo and Seneca Falls and just a few miles from Cayuga and Seneca lakes.

New York's fourth and fifth largest landfills are in metropolitan Buffalo. The sixth largest is Monroe County's Mill Seat Landfill in Riga.

Mill Seat and a small facility run by Auburn in Cayuga County are the only two other operating landfills in the Finger Lakes region.

Those landfills, like most others in New York, accept waste primarily from their hometowns or from nearby counties. Some are governed by local ordinances that forbid importation from far-off communities.

That's what sets apart the three big Finger Lakes landfills: Far from forbidding imported waste, they thrive on it.

The trio of landfills took in a whopping 3,347,000 tons of waste last year.

Of that amount, only 4 percent came from the facilities' home counties and just 5 percent more came from neighboring counties. **The remaining 91 percent was shipped from farther away — half of it from New York City.**

Waste shipments from the Big Apple have soared. In 2012, Seneca Meadows took in 500,000 tons from the five boroughs — about 75 tractor-trailer loads a day, a not-insignificant amount. But the two other big Finger Lakes landfills took none.

Fast-forward five years to 2017.

Ontario County had added an average of **39 trailers of New York City trash a week** to its already robust intake.

Seneca Meadows had **upped its NYC load by 75 percent**, to the equivalent of 680 trailer loads each week.

High Acres became a huge importer of Big Apple waste, taking the equivalent of **430 trailer loads a day** — except that it arrived on rail cars.

Several trainloads of Brooklyn and Queens solid waste arrive each week, typically after dark. Some 560,000 tons of New York City refuse was buried at High Acres last year.

About 29 percent of New York City's solid waste is now being shipped to the Finger Lakes region, said Dina Montes, spokeswoman for the city's Department of Sanitation. The balance of their refuses goes to incinerators and out-of-state landfills.

Trash trains blamed for offensive odors

McNeil and others blame the rail shipments for the rotting-garbage odors that have suffused Perinton and Macedon neighborhoods for the last year or so.

“High Acres' daily intake basically doubled once the trash trains started arriving in mid-2015,” McNeil said. “Their infrastructure was not able to handle the volume and resulting landfill gas. We’ve been living with the consequences.”

Officials at Waste Management Inc., the industry giant that owns High Acres, have denied the hydrogen sulfide odors resulted from the big jump in waste deliveries that began three years ago. Instead, they say engineering and construction problems, and last year’s excessive precipitation, are at fault.

Company officials also say two public health assessments show that the hydrogen sulfide levels are not a public health concern. But spurred on by a Department of Environmental Conservation citation, and a background chorus of irate residents, they've been taking steps to reduce the odors.

Seneca Meadows, owned by Texas-based Waste Connections, attempted to create its own rail link several years ago. Local opposition thwarted the plan. The idea of rail to Ontario County Landfill was bandied about but not acted upon.

The incinerator, were it to be built, would have a rail connection as well. The expectation is much of its trash would come from New York City.

Rail is a far more efficient way to move commodities such as trash, and the associated air pollution is much less.

But landfill foes strongly oppose it, fearing that rail provides a means to deliver ever-larger quantities of trash.

"In fact, the number of trucks won't decrease," Knipple said. "There'd just be more trash coming in."

Landfills provide hundreds of jobs and a crucial service

Finger Lakes trash is big business.

In 2013, the *D&C* estimated annual revenues as high as \$200 million. The figure would be much higher now.

Waste Management and New York City signed a 20-year contract in 2017 under which trash will be shipped by rail to High Acres and a landfill in Virginia. The value: \$3.3 billion, or \$165 million a year.

The landfills provide several hundred jobs, and indirectly support many others. The owners make payments to host communities, and pay considerable taxes. There's no record of major leaks from the landfills, or pollution of local groundwater.

And they provide a crucial, if messy, service.

"Seneca Meadows is one of just 27 non-hazardous, solid waste landfills that help manage the ever-increasing volume of non-recyclable waste in New York state," said Kyle Black, the district manager for Seneca Meadows. "Our 20-plus year spotless environmental compliance record with the state, and two national awards, attest to our company's commitment to protect our air, water and other natural resources."

DEC officials defend the facilities in the sense that all disposal facilities, they say, must adhere to strict standards before being allowed to open or before their permits are extended. Landfills are continually monitored to ensure they're operating in accord with the rules, officials said.

And while landfills remain the state's most-used trash disposal option, DEC officials insist progress is being made at reducing the load through more re-use, diversion and recycling of waste.

But any progress there, has been overwhelmed by volume: The amount of trash buried in New York state landfills rose 22 percent from 2012 to 2017, with the lion's share of the increase coming at the Finger Lakes facilities.

DEC attributed this to an increase in population and development in New York City and some other parts of the state.

Many neighbors of the Finger Lakes landfills — like neighbors of landfills everywhere — consider the landfills nuisances they'd be better off without.

Odor complaints have dogged all three landfills. Neighbors grit their teeth over diesel fumes, dust, litter, noise and the traffic snarls that come with thousands of truck visits each year.

Each of the three facilities has been subject to litigation involving citizen groups or local governments. At present, Seneca Meadows is suing the town of Seneca Falls, in which the landfill is largely located, over a town law that seeks to force the landfill to close by 2025.

Landfills unlikely to close soon, despite opposition

Opposition to the landfills has been present for many years, but it has been fed by other developments in the region.

The battle over hydraulic fracturing for natural gas, or fracking, and the fight over a proposal to store hydrocarbons in salt caverns beneath Seneca Lake both raised environmental consciousness in the region. Many wineries and other businesses joined residents in working on that issues.

Then came last year's incinerator proposal, which caused even more environmental angst.

All of that added fuel to the existing anti-landfill efforts, but so far, there has been limited success. All three big Finger Lakes landfills have DEC operating permits that are valid through at least 2023, and all three have capacity to operate beyond that.

High Acres says it has enough approved space to continue landfilling at its current pace for 30 more years.

Unhappy neighbors may be part of the landscape, said Joseph Fusco, vice president of Casella Waste Systems, which operates Ontario County Landfill.

“People sometimes have an emotional reaction to the idea of landfills — and that feeling is often less than favorable,” he said. “Feelings or biases aside, the inescapable fact is that modern landfills — highly regulated, highly engineered, relentlessly permitted — currently play an important role in how our society manages the waste it produces, and are a crucial part of the infrastructure necessary to manage public and environmental health.”

Knipple, of the zero-waste group, said it wasn't supposed to be this way.

Large landfills like those in the Finger Lakes came to the fore when state and federal environmental officials forced the closure of many small, poorly run landfills decades ago.

Today, they're so big and relied upon so much to accommodate other people's trash that many local and state don't want to contemplate closing them.

“The notion at that time was that we weren't going to continue to use these so-called modern-day landfills in perpetuity. But that seems to be where we are,” Knipple said. “I don't know how we get unstuck from that without some real political leadership.”

Raw data: Source of trash for each New York landfill, 2017 and 2012

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