

## Written Testimony – Staying the Course for Recycling & Composting during Covid-19

Dear House and Senate Natural Resources Committee Members,

Thank you all for tackling such important legislation over the years, including topics relating to Solid Waste Management in Vermont. Now, with the arrival of the Coronavirus we have challenges to some of our longest and most recent programs – universal recycling, the bottle bill, the ban on single-use plastics, and the food residuals/composting part of the Act 148.

Although I've submitted testimony on behalf of DUMP in the past year, this is my individual testimony, written after listening to two days of House testimony on this topic last week. It is informed by my knowledge through DUMP investigations of Casella Waste System, the Coventry Landfill, and the Solid Waste Management program that the Agency of Natural Resources has created. It is also based on my love and concern for the environment and future of the Northeast Kingdom.

I recognize the importance of flexibility in many areas of State business during this State of Emergency surrounding the pandemic. While this may be a *relatively* short-term crisis, it has far-reaching, long-time consequences, and rolling back the programs we have now is not the only way forward. I'm not going to repeat all the facts & figures shared in the testimonies but I did continue the conversation with a Solid Waste Management District Coordinator this morning to solicit Kingdom-specific information. Here are my bullet points:

\* **Covid-19 protocols** were put in place in Essential Worker businesses, per their work with the VT Dept. of Health. Impacts on work in recycling facilities is minimal except where some (less than half) drop-off centers had to close because of the public congregating. The ANR could have issued protocols for this rather than rescinding the mandate and allowing recyclables to be dumped into the landfill – which was also recognized by some testifiers as a health hazard itself.

\* **Long-range planning** – Not happening in Administration's Solid Waste Management Program – they have no back-up plan for the sole landfill in Vermont. If it caved or if pollution/leachate concerns increased even more, with more garbage, where would we be? ANR works in tandem with Casella and listening to both Peter Walke and Cathy Jamieson showed not much specificity to answers raised by committee members, compared to other organizations/businesses.

\***Lack of coordination & training across the state** – Haulers, facilities, populations, and distances are all different in Vermont, but certainly there could have been Act 148 trainings shared, with practices modeled, incentives provided, and mentoring from successful recycling/composting/energy-producing centers. The education behind these environmental programs has been next to nil – but I was lucky enough to attend a “Demystifying Waste” workshop put on by the Lamoille SWMD and presented by the Craftsbury Energy Committee. No other programs were advertised for the general public by the ANR.

\* **Loss of messaging in Recycling Program** -- Some of us have been able to recycle in Vermont since the 1990s including in the Kingdom and when Act 148 came along, all Vermonters were quickly brought on board, including elderly neighbors who weren't in the habit. Change the habit and you lose all the work that has gone into this important waste reduction program.

\* **The food residuals component of Act 148** should be maintained and supported as much as possible. With this covid-19 state of awareness, many Vermonters have expressed concern about food sustainability and insecurity. Some have decided to grow a garden again, including a community giving garden we are planting in Barton. There is a big cry for composting, which in many parts of the state has turned out to be a great business for new facilities, with growth even doubling over the year. In the NEK this process has just begun, not because the SWMD in Lyndonville wasn't trying (7 years of trying!), but for lack of money, partnerships, and assistance. The new grant that was awarded to them will help create the infrastructure so that we, too, can have a source for our food scraps and our compost. It won't be fully available for a couple of years so the mandate could be curtailed here until then. In the meantime, how about some ANR assistance on education and encouragement on backyard or municipal composting, as many of us already do. We still need to reduce our waste stream, and the food residuals are the biggest and most concerning component for the landfill.

\* **Money and Opportunity** – there is a scarcity of the former and a surplus of the latter. Yes, businesses will take a long time to recover. Yes, haulers and customers alike will face new costs. Will there be incentives coming to help these environmental practices continue? The ANR receives a percentage of the monies coming from landfill tonnage, approximately \$3.2 million a year. The solid waste management districts receive a portion of that amount, maybe \$500,000 to split. From the rest of that fund, could incentives be created for Vermont to continue down the road of farm-to-energy programs, composting businesses, recyclable repurposing businesses? Think of how the state could grow its economy, its population, and its environment!

\* **Our reputation as a green state.** Please let's not be the first state in the country to retreat on all our important environmental efforts as a hasty response to this health crisis. Many people have signed the VPIRG petition here in the Kingdom and no doubt across the state asking the Legislature to uphold our strong wishes to keep Act 148 in place. Our young people deserve this. It may be that "no one wants to talk seriously about reducing waste," as heard recently, but Vermont as a leader needs to start and continue this conversation. It's our health and our future at stake.

I'm asking you all to weigh these concerns and hopes as you vote. Thank you.

Respectfully,

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Barton