

## After yearlong delay, Hampden waste facility expects full operations by July 1



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Craig Stuart-Paul the CEO of Fiberight during a tour at the company's new building in Hampden, Nov. 14, 2018. The facility is expected to be fully operational July 1, 2019.

By Charles Eichacker, BDN Staff • May 20, 2019 12:35 am

A new waste processing facility in Hampden is finally accepting some deliveries of garbage and recycling from communities across eastern, central and northern Maine, more than a full year after it was originally expected to open.

While those communities have been sending their solid waste to landfills since April 2018, they're now starting to ship it to the Hampden plant on an intermittent basis.

The plant should be commercially operational by July 1, according to the company that's built it, Fiberight, and the organization representing 115 sending communities, the Municipal Review Committee, or MRC.

Now, Fiberight has begun testing and operating the front end of its plant, where specialized equipment separates recyclables from other types of waste.

Before its July 1 opening, Fiberight still needs to complete the setup of its back end, which includes a pulper that will break down different types of waste, an area where materials will be washed and an anaerobic digester that will convert food and other organic waste into biogas.

The success of the facility will depend, in part, on Fiberight being able to sell the products created in that back end.

When fully operational, the plant will employ about 50 people and convert the stream of municipal solid waste into a mix of end products, including cellulose pulp, plastic fuel briquettes, biogas that can be pumped into a Bangor Natural Gas pipeline and recycled plastics and metals, according to Shelby Wright, Fiberight's director of community services.

"We're working with the communities and the MRC to ramp up as quickly as possible," Wright said.

Fiberight is now reviewing the types of waste the MRC towns are sending. The facility will also have to pass a performance test in late June before it goes fully online, according to George Aronson, a technical adviser to the MRC. When the plant is running, the MRC has agreed to send any residual waste to the commercial Crossroads Landfill in Norridgewock.

MRC member towns used to send their waste to the Penobscot Energy Recovery Co., or PERC, incinerator in Orrington, which produces

electricity from burning trash. But several years ago, the group decided to leave that arrangement in 2018, when a power purchase agreement between PERC and Emera Maine was set to expire and force higher rates on the sending communities.

Now, the group hopes Fiberight will eventually divert 80 percent of its members' waste away from landfills, according to Aronson. But he said the organization also recognizes the facility may have to adapt to unforeseen changes in the waste disposal market, such as a dramatic spike in U.S. recycling costs last year when China restricted the types of recyclables it would import.

Maine environmental laws identify landfilling as the least desirable way to dispose of waste, just below combusting waste to create energy, as PERC does.

But since the opening of the Hampden plant was delayed past April 2018 due to construction delays and a legal challenge to Fiberight's environmental permits by PERC, MRC communities had to instead send their solid waste straight to two landfills at a fee of \$70 per ton — the same amount they'll pay to send their waste to the Hampden plant when it's operational.

Between April 2018 and March 2019, the MRC towns sent a total of 81,782 tons of waste directly to landfills, according to the Maine Department of Environmental Protection. Of that total, 43,323 tons went to Crossroads Landfill and 38,458 tons to the state-owned Juniper Ridge Landfill in Old Town.

A handful of the MRC communities opted to send their waste to PERC over the last year in advance of Fiberight's opening so they could still send their waste to a facility that would reduce the amount that ended up in a landfill.

In 2017, PERC burned close to 80 percent of the 320,893 tons of solid waste it received, according to the most recent data available from the Department of Environmental Protection. The amount of waste that

eventually made it to a landfill, mostly ash, was about 18 percent of the original amount.

Aronson said that the 81,782 tons of waste that MRC communities have landfilled in the past year should not reflect on the long-range success of the Fiberight facility, which the organization has been helping to develop since 2013.

“The MRC is blazing a new path for the diversion of waste from landfills over the long term,” Aronson said. “I think it’s shortsighted to look at an interim period and make judgements about what’s essentially a plan for the next generation.”

The delay in the Fiberight facility’s opening has also forced the MRC to spend about half of a \$1 million reserve fund to reimburse its communities for transporting their waste any extra distance beyond what it would have taken to send the same load to Hampden.

But Aronson said the MRC was prepared for those extra costs and specifically set aside the funds in anticipation of them.

“Large construction and development projects always contain an element of uncertainty, and so the MRC planned for potential delays, and we’re just implementing the plan that we have prepared,” he said. “This is something that was anticipated, expected and frankly not that surprising.”