

The lobbying behind Maine’s trash fight

BY DARREN FISHELL
BDN STAFF

PORTLAND — As the Penobscot Energy Recovery Co. fights for its future beyond 2018, the company and its partner, USA Energy Group, have for the last two legislative sessions spent heavily to change the state’s waste management policy.

For those years, lobbyists for PERC and its partner disclosed the most compensation for any single client.

That spending has come as the group of 187 towns sending trash to PERC has leaned in favor of the proposed Fiberight facility in Hampden, which on Friday passed muster with environmental regulators and

secured three permits it will need to move ahead.

In the two most recent legislatures, PERC far outspent the 187-member Municipal Revenue Committee, according to a Bangor Daily News analysis of lobbying disclosures for those years.

(Lawmakers don’t have to disclose certain meals or gifts worth less than \$300, and strict interpretations of the disclosure law leave room for lobbyists to omit some compensation from a client from state reports.)

As the two entities carried out a town-by-town battle for waste from the northern two-thirds of Maine, the battle extended into the halls of the State House. In large part, their efforts centered on the same bills.

Spending more than \$656,000 in disclosed lobbying during the 126th Legislature, PERC pushed for laws passed to add to the state’s licensing criteria for waste facilities (LD 1483), requiring consideration of the state’s waste management priorities, or the waste management hierarchy.

In the 127th Legislature, lawmakers approved a bill to add to that hierarchy, creating new goals for keeping food out of the waste stream.

MRC testified against an earlier version of the bill (LD 1578), which also had a new battery recycling program.

The version that passed (LD 313) was the basis for

the Natural Resources Council of Maine’s statement opposing Fiberight’s DEP permits issued Friday.

“Fiberight cannot be a successful company without stymieing the growth of the composting industry in member communities,” NRCM wrote in its comments on Fiberight’s application to the DEP. “As such, we are perplexed as to how DEP could possibly endorse this shift away from local composting programs with-in such a large portion of the state.”

In the 126th Legislature, PERC and MRC focused on landfill regulations, with testimony pointing to PERC’s opposition to a bill that would have prohibited it and other incinerators



Workers offload trash at the Juniper Ridge Landfill in Old Town in January 2013. **BDN FILE**

from accepting out-of-state waste (LD 1363). The final version of the bill set a temporary moratorium on expanding any existing state-

owned landfills. PERC also supported a failed bill (LD 907) that would have assessed a flat *See Trash, Page C2*



A woman walks toward the main entrance of The Jackson Laboratory on Wednesday. The biomedical research lab, which is the largest employer in Hancock County, announced this month that it has raised its lowest starting wage (for nonprobationary employees) from \$10.75 to \$15 an hour. **BILL TROTTER | BDN**

New wages, new workers

Research facility aims to reward existing employees, recruit more

BY BILL TROTTER
BDN STAFF

ELLSWORTH — Within a few years of opening its new mouse production facility on Kingsland Crossing, which is scheduled to begin operations in January 2018, The Jackson Laboratory plans to have 230 employees working there, three-quarters of whom are expected to be new hires, lab officials have said.

With the lab’s announcement on July 12 that they have increased their lowest full-time wage to \$15 per hour, it means those 150 or so new employees collectively will be earning more than \$4.5 million a year. That’s in addition to the lab’s nearly 800 existing employees, of which 539 are based in Maine, who collectively are expected to see their annual wages go up by \$3.8 million because of the pay hike.

On the face of it, the income

boost is good news for the region economically. But, given the relatively small labor pool in eastern Maine, it raises questions: Where will the lab’s new employees come from? What kind of effect will the pay increase have on the region’s tight labor market?

According to Charles Hewett, the lab’s executive vice president and chief operating officer, the wage increase, which went into effect July 9, has been implemented to reward existing employees for increased productivity — but it also is aimed at helping to keep and recruit new employees.

“[The Jackson Lab] also anticipates that the increase in its wage scales will help ensure employee retention as well as assist in attracting and hiring committed new employees as the Laboratory grows and prospers in Maine, Connecticut and California,” he wrote in the July 12 statement.

The Jackson Lab, which is renovating the former Lowe’s building at 21 Kingsland Crossing in Ellsworth into its new mouse vivarium, has faced difficulty for many years in keeping its available positions filled. Though the lab has had layoffs in recent memory, it has been consistently expanding and creating new positions for much of the past 25 years.

Before the pay raise, the lab’s lowest full-time wage for employees who have passed their initial six-month probationary period is \$10.75 per hour, more than \$3 higher than the state’s mandated minimum wage of \$7.50 per hour.

Still, each day the lab buses employees from the Bangor area and from western Washington County to its Bar Harbor campus, a distance of about 50 miles for each location, to ensure it is adequately staffed. On top of that, as the lab indicated in its wage-increase announce-

ment, it now has more than 250 positions unfilled at its three campuses in Bar Harbor, California and Connecticut, of which roughly 150 are based in Maine.

The lab is not the only regional employer in a near-constant state of recruitment and training. In the summer, during the pell-mell tourist season, the labor market in the area is stretched even thinner, with many hoteliers and restaurateurs dependent on foreign labor to make sure the house cleaning and kitchen staffs at their seasonal businesses are full. Many small seasonal employers who do not hire foreign workers say they have difficulty hiring and retaining employees between Memorial Day and Columbus Day.

What the state’s mandated minimum wage should be has been a hotly debated topic in Maine the past couple of years, *See Wage, Page C2*



Magazine scams have gotten more sophisticated

BY RUSS VAN ARSDALE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NORTHEAST CONTACT

A consumer wrote to Northeast CONTACT recently, saying she was concerned about a series of offers to extend some of her magazine subscriptions.

CONSUMER FORUM

What tripped her radar was a discrepancy in expiration dates; one notice said a certain magazine subscription ended in September, another indicated November. Return envelopes for two magazines both were addressed to the same post office box in Texas.

We can’t say with certainty that either offer was bogus. All we can say is that anyone who is asked to renew well before an expiration date should examine the offer closely.

ConsumerAffairs.com has warned subscribers about phony renewal schemes. The perpetrators use materials that look real, but the ridiculously low prices are a tipoff that they’re often schemes to separate people from their money.

The fakers operate under so many names that finding and stopping them usually is a challenge.

In March 2015 the attorneys general of New York, Minnesota, Missouri, Oregon and Texas sued a network of companies claiming to offer “one of the lowest available rates.” Prosecutors contended the actual charges were about twice those of legitimate subscriptions.

Why do some companies offer below-cost rates?

Simply because they want your credit card number so they can run up charges you haven’t authorized. You lose your money and don’t get your renewal.

In May of this year, the Federal Trade Commission filed a complaint against several individuals and companies that it said were deceiving consumers. The companies allegedly sent renewal notices for some 375 newspapers — none of which had consented — to people claiming to offer bargain rates on subscriptions.

In fact, the FTC found that those prices were a lot higher than regular rates. The agency is trying to get at least partial refunds for affected consumers.

Newsmagazine The Nation published the names of two dozen companies that it said were making unauthorized subscription offers. Read the list at thenation.com/renewalscam.

The magazine industry has long opposed efforts to change what it calls “advance consent,” under which subscriptions can be automatically extended unless the subscriber opts out. This is what the FTC calls a “negative option.” The agency looked at strengthening its longstanding rule on negative option but decided two years ago to leave it as is.

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Despite summer demand, Maine gas prices dip

BY DARREN FISHELL
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PORTLAND — The average price of a gallon of regular gasoline in Maine fell about 3 cents in the past week, in line with a nationwide decline driven by record-high July gasoline inventories.

Price tracking website GasBuddy reported the average gallon of regular gasoline in Maine was selling for \$2.25 on Monday, about 51 cents lower than one year ago. The national average price was down to \$2.20, about 56 cents lower than one year ago.

“Despite fuel consumption near record levels, U.S. gasoline inventory recently reached the highest July level ever recorded (240.1 million barrels) and, concurrently, the national average has continued its consistent decline,” Gregg Laskoski, a senior analyst for GasBuddy, said in a news release.

The Energy Information Administration in April projected that this summer’s average gasoline price would be the lowest since 2004.

Maine’s average Monday was 1 cent lower than Vermont’s, at \$2.26, and higher than New Hampshire’s, at \$2.16.



A car is filled up at a gas station pump in Carlsbad, California, in August 2015. **REUTERS**