

Good afternoon all, I apologize for not being able to make this hearing in person today. My name is Jennifer Noll and I am a fisheries biologist for the DMR. I'm writing and submitting this testimony on my own personal time. I have been working for the state officially for 5 years and as a seasonal or year round contract employee for an additional 7 years prior to that. This longevity as a contract worker is rare to see now as contract workers get little to no benefits and work is typically only for a few months. The only reason that I stuck around was because I had a passion for the work and the sense that I was making a difference in the world. Also at that time, the pay was comparable to other jobs and I was lucky enough not to have major health issues so I could dodge needing health insurance. I have to admit though, there were times that I was nervous to take sick days since I wasn't compensated and was living pay check to paycheck; I'm not sure that I could've worked through the pandemic as a contractor.

Keep in mind that contractors are now expected to take on all of the job responsibilities that conservation aides, technicians or specialists (state positions) used to take on. For our program this includes being an active team member and learning protocols of 6 different assessment projects, entering data and learning the quirks of 6 different databases, learning ~50 or more sites across multiple drainages and connecting with their landowners, maintenance work on equipment and gear for all 6 assessments, sample prep and processing, inventorying gear, and many other random jobs. This is a lot to take on for a recent college graduate, who are typically the applicants for these types of positions. As you can probably imagine, this also takes an enormous amount of time out of the biologists' schedule to train someone to do these tasks, particularly if this person is only here for one season. These are the people who we need to train enough in a few days to trust with our endangered species. It is crucial that we create and fund positions like state technicians or specialists to allow us to be effective in our positions.

The program that I work in is funded by a federal grant and gets no state funding. This is problematic when state employees attempt to get compensation for the work that they've been tasked with. For us that are passionate about what we do and understand the consequences of what will happen if work doesn't get done, we typically get the task done regardless of the outcome because it's the right thing to do. However, when the task becomes one that needs to happen on an annual basis, this is when burn out occurs, particularly when we're not compensated fairly for it. When we do go through the lengthy process of a job reclassification upgrade for the tasks that we've been doing, and get the award of fair(er) compensation, then we have to worry about not having enough funding for our contract help to get required tasks accomplished.

Luckily we are under an administration and upper management that are starting to understand this situation and I believe that we're working in a positive direction. That being said, there is still more that can be done to fairly compensate and prevent burn out in state government.

Thank you for hearing my story.

-Jen