

Dear Sen. Rotundo, Rep. Sachs, and Honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations as well as Sen. Reny, Rep. Hepler, and Honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources,

I am writing to you to testify in favor of LD 2214, “An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025”, and emphasize how larger appropriations are needed to improving Maine state government function and employee recruitment and retention. The current allotment of resources is limiting the function of government, creating issues with high position vacancy rates, which are not unique to any one Department or Program, but have affected my duties and the outlook of my Division as a Marine Resource Scientist II in the Department of Marine Resources (DMR).

Life as a Maine State Employee working in West Boothbay Harbor in 2024, requires most employees to live out of the local community and ‘off peninsula’, including myself, driving 45 minutes one way to the office from a slightly more affordable Bath housing market. The mismatch between State compensation and the housing costs has impacted recruitment and retention, with staff resources spent on searches that result in zero or limited applicants, restricting the ability to attract applicants that would maximize program performance. Single program staffing deficiencies have secondary impacts because State Government is so interconnected. The Administrative Staff positions in the West Boothbay Office are only recently fully staffed as of fall 2023 for the first time in at least 3 years. The most senior of these positions has cycled through 3 hires in that time, with one leaving to return to New York City, citing a better ability to afford housing close to their workplace, unbelievably. In the interim, administrative tasks were shouldered by science staff in addition to their own responsibilities, stressing the human resources meant to serve the Maine people through their respective programs. The State investment in onboarding positions with high turnover is also substantial, impacting the ability of the State to function as intended. An understaffed financial office also impacts the ability to purchase required equipment, process contracts and invoices, and meet external reporting deadlines within our department. These examples underscore the pervasiveness of the understaffing issue and how, even if one program is fully staffed, its ability to serve the Maine people to its best ability can still be hamstrung.

The additional resources through appropriations will mitigate an issue which has been highlighted by my recent experience receiving two successful proposals totaling \$5 million dollars in award from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. One of these proposals partners with 6 mostly nonprofit organizations along the Maine coast to conduct the work, ranging from York to Washington counties. Five of these partners submitted budgets which fund a full time position through this money, 4 of which are new positions. The scopes of work for these positions are all narrower than my own, yet every single one of them is advertising at least a higher wage, and most a more competitive overall compensation package. These future job postings are going to be in direct competition with 3 DMR positions to be created through other awards to do the same work. The most qualified job seekers in this marine science market will choose to work for those nonprofit entities instead of DMR, which is more directly competitive with graduate or post-Doctoral stipends without the coinciding academic career advancement.

Employment with the State should not be a last resort for qualified job seekers in Maine. Maine State employees should not have to live on the financial edge of affording housing where they work. Maine State employees should not have to continually perform duties beyond their position due to chronic and persistent vacancies. The people of Maine should not be continually underserved by their State Government. Supporting LD 2214 is a step towards enhancing government function, potentially by directly funding LD 2121 “An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions”, or through other means to support existing employees, reduce the resources spent on staff turnover, increase the prestige of working for the State of Maine, and enhance the ability of the State to serve its people – all with a great return on this investment.

Thank you to the representative officials who are continuing to work and address this matter.

Sincerely,

Kevin Staples