

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, members of the Committee on Environmental and Natural Resources. My name is Robert Leighton.

I am here on my own time to speak about staffing issues at the Department of Environmental Protection and the need for the Maine State Legislature to work towards closing the State Employee Pay Gap to ensure my Department, as well as others throughout Maine's Executive Branch can fix chronic understaffing issues, and allow our underpaid workforce to have wages that match market rates, and keep up with the ever-increasing cost-of-living.

I have worked for the Maine Department of Environmental Protection for the last 8+ years, and am also a delegate for my union chapter. My job is to manage the Department's Environmental and Geographic Analysis Database (EGAD), which stores environmental sampling data (lab results, field measurements, etc.) taken by our state scientists and other third-party consultants. EGAD also serves as the inter-agency database for all environmental sampling (groundwater, soil, sludge, surface water, etc.) taken as part of the Maine's statewide PFAS investigation, and this data is being used for reports given to the Legislature for LDs such as LD 1600, "An Act To Investigate Perfluoroalkyl and Polyfluoroalkyl Substance Contamination of Land and Groundwater" and LD 1911 "An Act to Prevent the Further Contamination of the Soils and Waters of the State with So-called Forever Chemicals." About a year ago, we lost our EGAD Data Assistant (a Planning and Research Assistant) and we have yet to fill this vacancy. My supervisor and division director WANT to fill the role but, because the position only pays around \$18 an hour, filling it has become next to impossible. Right now, they are trying to reclassify the job into a higher pay grade. But because we're short staffed, our unit's chemists and myself are splitting the duty of uploading all new incoming Electronic Data Deliverables (EDDs).

As the scope of the PFAS investigation widens with each passing year, with that comes even more EDDs and reports which must be vetted and uploaded to EGAD. Without this position filled, this takes time away from the other duties of my job (e.g. database management and fulfilling ad hoc data requests) as well as from the duties of our chemists to review hundreds of lab reports each year. This also means that our state scientists have to wait longer to use their data to complete their recurring project reports.

If the Department is to live up to its goal of protecting the people of Maine and Maine's natural resources, we need to see action as well as leadership that is willing to invest in workers by offering a wage that matches with our private sector counterparts by working to close the pay gap thru good-faith negotiations. Rejecting the Administration's proposal to remove nearly \$44 million dollars from the State's Personnel Budget and transfer that to the General Fund, would be a good first step. More importantly, now is NOT the time for even more fiscal austerity at the expense of Maine workers, especially given the chaos and uncertainty happening in Washington D.C. now.

Thank you and I'd be happy to answer any questions.

Robert Leighton