

**Testimony of Beth White**  
**Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989**  
**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs**  
**and the Joint Standing Committee on Environment and Natural Resources,**  
**10am Thursday, February 6, 2025, State House Room 228 and Electronically**

**LD 210, An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds**  
**for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to**  
**the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026**  
**and June 30, 2027, (Emergency) (Governor's Bill),**  
**Sponsored by Representative Drew Gattine**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, and members of the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, I'm Beth White, director of politics and legislation for the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. We are a labor union representing over 13,000 Maine workers, including workers at the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

First, we're encouraged by the proposal to add eight new positions within DEP and to continue a number of limited period positions. This includes the initiative on Page A-262 to establish one Environmental Specialist III Position and one Environmental Specialist IV position to support the prevention of PFAS pollution – the so-called forever chemicals formally known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances. As many of you may know, PFAS pollution in Maine has become a real health and safety problem for Maine people, our visitors, and wildlife. Numerous private and public wells, including those serving some [public schools](#), [mobile home parks](#) and [local water districts](#) in our great state have been contaminated by PFAS. Regions of the state are being issued ["do not eat" advisories](#) for fish and game due to PFAS contamination, and Maine [more than 60 farms have been identified](#) as having unsafe levels of these carcinogenic chemicals. And in a major incident of PFAS pollution, the Brunswick Naval Air Station's [fire suppression system malfunctioned](#) on Aug. 19, 2024, releasing over 1,450 gallons of firefighting foam and 50,000 gallons of PFAS-contaminated water into Maine's environment and resident's drinking water. [This was the largest spill of its kind in Maine's history](#), and the 6<sup>th</sup> largest of its kind in the United State in the last 30 years.

While the addition of two new positions at Maine DEP will help address Maine's PFAS-pollution crisis, much more must be done systemically and in support of the Maine DEP by both the Maine Legislature and the Mills administration to ensure that the DEP has the staffing and resources necessary to carry out its legislatively mandated mission of preventing, abating and controlling air, water and land pollution. This work by our members supports the health and wellness of Maine's people. As of November 2024, this critical Department had over 36 vacancies – while simultaneously asking workers to do more with less.

[A coalition of 10 environmental groups](#) on May 19, 2023, wrote to the Legislature's State and Local Government Committee, and CC'ed the Appropriations Committee, in which they identified the need for the State to complete and implement a review of state employees' salaries as a necessary step in addressing Maine's serious environmental challenges. The groups wrote, "The Department of Environment Protection (DEP) has struggled to address the serious issue of PFAS contamination due to

turnover in staff charged with maintaining data and lack of staff focused on rulemaking and implementation in the Safer Chemicals program. Numerous vacancies at the DEP are impacting the ability to review and issue water quality permits and licensing ... We hear again and again that state agencies are unable to fill key positions due to uncompetitive salary levels. Qualified applicants are selecting jobs outside of state government with more security and better pay. This is not surprising, given that repeated compensation studies have found state employees are underpaid by an average of 15%, and far more for many positions.”

Sadly, little progress has been made in addressing the state employee pay gap; [the State of Maine Market Pay Report](#) dated Sept. 30, 2024, put the pay gap at 14% -- a 1% improvement since 2019.

In its report titled the [State of Working Maine 2024: Gains and Gaps in a Strong Economy](#), the Maine Center for Economic Policy shared the story of Rebekah Koroski, who serves on the board of directors of our union, MSEA-SEIU Local 1989, and has worked for the Maine DEP for 23 years, currently as Management Analyst II. She collects payments from responsible parties when oil and hazardous waste incidents happen in Maine. She mostly works on cases involving leaks and spills, but has also worked on recent major cases like the train derailment in Jackman and the PFAS foam spill in Brunswick.

Rebekah told her story of dealing with impossible caseloads – she had 262 cases at the time the MECEP report came out. She said at the time, “Lawmakers don’t understand how underpaid state employees are. There are plenty of state workers who have to work additional jobs to supplement their income. There was a time when I had two part-time jobs in addition to my job with the state. Even now, I have a home-based business I run in my off-hours to supplement our household income.”

Rebekah said the recruitment and retention problem at the Maine DEP is real and a direct result of low pay. “We’ve had our share of people we offer jobs to say, ‘I can’t come and work for you for that,’” she said in the report. “It’s hard to keep staff when you’re not competitive. It’s not good for morale, either.”

Rebekah’s story illustrates why we are extremely concerned about the Governor’s proposal (Part R) to remove nearly \$44 million from the State’s personnel budget and transfer that amount into the General Fund, where it would be used for other purposes. The administration proposes to more than triple the state employee attrition rate, from 1.6% to 5%, in both the Executive and Judicial branches of Maine State Government, in order to justify this proposed financial maneuver. Understaffing throughout all departments of state government remains a serious problem often with devastating consequences on both state workers and Maine people who rely on their services. The State’s own studies show that state workers remain substantially underpaid compared to their public and private sector counterparts throughout Maine and New England. [Please see the related memo](#), attached to my testimony, that we presented to the Appropriations Committee on Oct. 8, 2024, detailing our response to the State’s Market Pay Report dated Sept. 30, 2024.

The money in the State’s Salary Plan is there to fund budgeted positions and to close the state employee pay gap, and it shouldn’t be used as a piggybank to fund other priorities. We’d like to respectfully remind you that Part PPP of the Supplemental Budget passed by the Legislature and signed into law on April 22, 2024, expressly authorizes the administration to use all funds in the State’s Salary Plan to negotiate with us over the implementation of a new compensation and classification system for Executive Branch workers—and those negotiations are ongoing. The administration’s proposal to transfer nearly \$44 million from the State’s personnel budget into the General Fund appears to be an attempt to end run

Part PPP. We ask that you reject this change and ensure these resources are used to address these serious recruitment and retention issues.

We look forward to working with you, your fellow members of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Legislature and the administration to develop and pass a two-year State Budget that truly meets the needs of all Maine people. Thank you and I'd be glad to answer any questions.