

**Testimony of Beth White
Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989**

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs,
and the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry
10am Thursday, February 27, 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 Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, 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 Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF).

First, we support the numerous reclassifications, reorganizations, and range changes in the proposed biennial budget, some of which fall outside of MSEA bargaining units. We also support the creation of new positions and the continuation of limited period positions. Understaffing has been an ongoing concern across state government for many years, impacting both the workers providing critical services and the Mainers who rely on these services. While we appreciate the administration's efforts to address the challenges, there is still much more work to be done. The administration's proposed State Budget continues to fall short of what's needed to ensure quality services for all Maine people. Understaffing and vacancies at DACF and throughout all departments of Maine State Government remain a serious problem.

According to data provided by the Executive Branch, as of November 2024, excluding any seasonal positions, DACF had 46 non-seasonal vacancies out of 358 positions, for a non-seasonal vacancy rate of 12.8%. These vacancies are mostly full-time positions, and they are making it difficult for the workers to provide the high level of quality services that Maine people and visitors to our great state deserve. The vacancy rate at DACF is too high given the important work performed by DACF employees and the revenues that our state parks and historic sites generate for the State.

In 2024, Maine's state parks had another record breaking year, with more than three million people visiting the parks, a more than 6% increase in attendance over 2023 and the third time in four years that visitation surpassed 3 million, [according to a Maine Public article from January 17, 2025](#). Yet while our state parks see these record numbers, understaffing due to low pay continues to be a problem at DACF. In 2023, [the managers at 24 of our state parks asked the Legislature's State and Local Government Committee support legislation to close the state employee pay gap](#). They wrote in a joint letter:

"The salary offered, both for the new employee and the experienced staff member, is often less than the

salary offered local fast-food restaurants. When combined with the housing crisis that is already plaguing Maine, the result of this low pay and skewed pay scale is an inability to recruit and retain staff. Staff are, quite understandably, leaving the parks in droves; yet, the members of staff that remain are being asked to not only continue providing the level of service expected when the parks were fully staffed, but are actually being asked to shoulder increased responsibility.

The effect of a decrease in staffing, when coupled with an increase in responsibility, has created an atmosphere of risk within the parks. With staff stretched thin, facilities cannot be maintained to the same level of safety as is possible when parks are fully staffed. It is a matter of time until the facilities deteriorate. Without the workforce necessary to see to their upkeep, visitors will soon begin to encounter parks that are dirtier, less safe, and far below the standard that we, the park staff, want to maintain. Without the resources to rectify this, we fear an increase in accidents and injuries and a general lowered public perception of those spaces that have traditionally been clean, well-kept, and responsible for offering a safe and enjoyable recreational experience to the public.”

Similarly, park workers today are reporting understaffing remains a serious problem. Adam Raven, an assistant park ranger for the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, wrote on his own time that while he and his coworkers are passionate for protecting Maine’s parks, “passion alone does not pay the bills.” Adam has “watched talented colleagues—many of them friends—leave these positions because they simply cannot afford to stay. Many find better-paying opportunities in the private sector or in other states where similar roles offer more competitive wages. Given the technical expertise and life skills necessary for success in this field, recruiting and retaining qualified candidates has become increasingly difficult once they fully grasp the job’s demands.”

With understaffing continuing at DACF and the state employee pay gap remaining at 14% as of September 2024, which is an improvement of 1% in the last five years, you can see 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. 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](#) 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 respectfully ask that you address the state employee pay gap so that the State can recruit and retain workers, including those at DACF. Their work is so essential and beneficial to Maine's working families, our communities and our economy.

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