

**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 Marine Resources
10am Wednesday, February 26, 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 Hepler and members of the Committee on Marine 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 Marine Resources (DMR).

First, we support the numerous reclassifications, reorganizations, and range changes in the proposed biennial budget, some of which fall outside of MSEA bargaining units. 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 DMR and throughout all departments of Maine State Government remain a serious problem.

According to data provided by the Executive Branch, as of April 2024, DMR had 28 vacancies for a vacancy rate of 16%. While the number of vacant positions at DMR dropped to 22 as of November 2024, for a vacancy rate of 12.5%, all of these vacancies need to be filled immediately to ensure quality services at DMR.

During the last legislative session, workers for DMR testified how understaffing has impacted their duties and outlook of their department. As one of our members who works as a Marine Resource Specialist II stated in testimony on February 8, 2024, "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... 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.”

In addition, marine-resources positions elsewhere, including those that are funded by grants, often are more narrow-focused than some DMR positions, yet all pay better than the State’s wages. Our DMR workers believe that employment with the State shouldn’t be a last resort for qualified job seekers in Maine. DMR workers and all other state employees shouldn’t have to live on the financial edge of affordable housing where they work, and they shouldn’t have to continually perform duties beyond their positions due to chronic and persistent vacancies.

These are all among the reasons 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; 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.