

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs committee. Senator Baldacci, Representative Roberts, members of the Inland Fisheries & Wildlife Committee. My name is Joshua Kuester. I am currently a Fish Culture Supervisor at the Grand Lake Stream State Fish Hatchery. I am here to speak to the abhorrent personnel services budget proposals outlined in LD210.

I have been a state employee for nearly 12 years. Being a state employee fills me with a great sense of pride; since the first time I put on a button-up state shirt as a seasonal fisheries technician in Jonesboro, and still yesterday when I buttoned up my state chamois shirt, it makes me proud of what I represent. I'm here to tell you that I love what I do, and that fact in itself has allowed me to put up with a lot. But everyone has their breaking point, and for many of us in the Hatchery division, we are fast reaching it.

I never imagined that I would need to fight so hard against the people in my own administration, those who are supposed to be my allies, supposed to be my respected leaders, supposed to bring this Department and all my counterparts in other divisions together into one shared mission. Yet here I am, feeling as though I am begging for scraps, being allowed to wallow in what is described by Commissioner Camuso herself as "well below livable wages¹". A problem that has plagued the Hatchery system for what is now decades. All we seek is adequate compensation for our economic contribution to the State of Maine.

The Fish Culturist position requires a broad spectrum of both vocational skills and college level biological science knowledge. However, extremely under qualified candidates are consistently making up the entirety of the candidate pool for our many vacant positions. The root of our hiring issue translates directly with our struggle to retain employees. The hatcheries have a high number of recent hires that quickly leave because the scope of the job is greater than what we are being compensated for. This is a truly troubling development.

If the unwillingness from administration to address these issues continues, then we will continue to suffer turnover, hindering the hatchery division's ability to succeed. If the administration and legislature solve these pay issues, we know this would benefit the State of Maine. It would establish a culture that helps recruit and retain employees of a higher quality, resulting in a more knowledgeable staff while also increasing employee morale.

In the past two years we have had 5 of 8 supervisors retire or resign prior to retirement age. Such a loss of job knowledge has a trickle-down effect on the overall functionality of the division as well as employee morale. When does the Hatchery Division, which according to Director Elizabeth Latti "contributes 300 million dollars to the State of Maine's economy²", when do we get our recompense? We ask for immediate support from members of these committees. Our work cannot sustain itself when hiring at a mere \$17.69 an hour. Thank you for your time.

References:

1: Judy Camuso: Testimony to Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Legislative Committee: January 15th at 1:00PM: Orientation: Located from 1:55:10PM to 1:55:50PM of Meeting Recording.

<https://legislature.maine.gov/audio/#206?event=92360&startDate=2025-01-15T13:00:00-05:00>

2: Elizabeth Latti: Testimony in Support of L.D. 76 Before the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Legislative Committee: February 3rd: Paragraph 4, Sentence 1.

<https://legislature.maine.gov/backend/app/services/getDocument.aspx?doctype=test&documentId=183210>