

**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 Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
1pm 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 Baldacci, Representative Roberts and members of the Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, 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 Inland Fisheries and wildlife (IF&W).

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 IF&W and throughout all departments of Maine State Government remain a serious problem.

According to data provided by the Executive Branch, as of April 2024, IF&W had 15 vacancies for a vacancy rate of 9%. Since then, the number of vacant positions at IF&W has increased to 17 as of November 2024, for a vacancy rate of 10%. All of these vacancies need to be filled immediately to ensure quality services at IF&W.

Right now at IF&W, wages remain extremely low, and the department has been unable to allocate enough money to pay workers for overtime work for years, so the department is looking to supplement its budget using the hatchery maintenance fund. Over the last three years, for example, the hatcheries division has lost three supervisors and several fish culturists to the private sector. Most have left for better-paying jobs. Longtime employees have grown accustomed to training new hires for a year, only for them to leave for better pay elsewhere.

As an example of low wages: The starting pay in the hatcheries division is \$17.69 an hour – less than \$37,000 a year. But don't take my word for it; several IF&W workers are here today to share their stories with you to help you understand their realities as frontline workers.

The realities of IF&W workers illustrate 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.