

**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
2pm Thursday, February 26, 2026, State House Room 228 and Electronically**

**LD 2212, An Act Making Supplemental 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, 2026 and June 30, 2027" (Emergency) (Governor's Bill)**

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).

While we are here today to testify neither for nor against LD 2212, we'd like to make recommendations for a fair supplemental budget that ensures quality public services for all Maine people and provides state workers with the respect they have earned but long been denied.

We support the inclusion of \$250,000 for fish hatchery improvements; our members who work at the fish hatcheries have expressed the need for improvements at the facilities, and this funding will help address those issues. We also support the reorganizations in this portion of the budget.

As part of your deliberations on LD 2212, you need to know that wages at IF&W remain extremely low. Over the last four years, 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. I'd like to remind you about the experiences of three IF&W workers who testified before you one year ago today on this same issue:

- Mike Andrews worked at the Dry Mills State Fish Hatchery in Gray before retiring in the last year. He said, "The most difficult aspect of this is training employees just to have them leave for better pay elsewhere! Retention is at an all-time low and recruitment is very difficult at this time. I realize this is an issue all across Maine's Executive Branch departments; however, it is especially difficult when my colleagues and I are in charge

of raising and stocking live fish for the public. The bottom line is that finding good, qualified people and keeping them is difficult with such low wages. I believe the only way to retain workers is to close the pay gap between state employees and private sector employees.”

- Jessie Kuester used to work as a Fish Culturist at Grand Lake Stream, but has left state service since her testimony in 2025. She explained how, when interviewing for the job, she was told she’d need a second job because the fish culturist salary is so low. She said, “Our work involves raising fish that contributes to over \$300 million in annual revenue to Maine’s economy. Consider the extensive responsibility we have. We raise fish in all stages of their life, stock fish throughout Maine waters, administer daily maintenance of facilities, we have required onsite housing, provide educational tours and classroom events, and more. Yet, we are punished with low wages [starting wage \$17.69/hr] that have not seen appropriate increases. Our roles are essential for the IF&W to succeed in their natural resource goals.”
- Another IF&W employee, Josh Kuester, works as a Fish Culture Supervisor at the Grand Lake Stream State Fish Hatchery. Josh shared, “The Fish Culturist position job 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 to our struggle with retaining employees. The hatcheries have a high number of recent hires that quickly leave because scope of the job is greater than what we are being compensated for. This is an unsustainable and troubling development.”

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 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.

The realities of IF&W workers like Mike Andrews, Jessie Kuester and Josh Kuester illustrate why we strenuously objected in 2025 when the 132nd Maine Legislature and the Mills administration diverted \$56 million away from the Salary Plan, which pays wages of state workers, and used that money for other priorities. This raid on the Salary Plan wasn’t a one-time occurrence. Throughout the entirety of the Mills administration, the Legislature has diverted money away from the Salary Plan under the veil of raising the attrition rate for state workers, as well as allocating funds from vacancy savings for capital improvements.

In the wake of the repeated raids on the Salary Plan throughout the Mills administration, the administration now claims it cannot afford anything more than a pair of 2% pay raises for the

Executive Branch workers whom we represent. When the administration made this claim, they specifically cited the impact of the higher attrition rate on the Salary Plan as a reason why. Our members in the Executive Branch have been working without new contracts since July 1, 2025 – that’s nearly eight months. The proposed pay raises from the Mills administration would widen, not shrink, the state employee pay gap because they would put state workers further behind the cost of living. That’s inexcusable.

Members of MSEA-SEIU Local 1989 who work for the Executive Branch of Maine State Government have had enough of hearing that there is no funding to solve the persistent recruitment and retention challenges or to address the state employee pay gap, while at the same time seeing the funding from the vacancies used to solve other problems. The overwhelming reason for these vacancies is the lack of competitive compensation compared to similar jobs in municipalities, in other state governments in New England, and in the private sector. These vacancies create a vicious cycle: remaining members absorb crushing workloads, burning out and leaving, which drives even more vacancies.

Maine's public services are unraveling — and the people of Maine are paying the price. That’s why we respectfully ask this committee to restore the \$56 million taken from the Salary Plan last year, and to do so as part of the deliberations on LD 2212. Please address the state employee pay gap so that the State can recruit and retain workers like Mike Andrews, Jessie Kuester and Josh Kuester. 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.