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
1:30pm Monday, February 23, 2026, State House Room 228 and Electronically

On 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), 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, range changes, and continuation of limited period positions in this section of the proposed budget. However, the administration's proposed 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 recent years, Maine's state parks have had record breaking numbers of visitors. In 2024, with more than three million people visited 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. The trend continued in 2025; nearly 2.6 million people visited the state park system according to the Bureau of Parks and Lands 2025 Public Use Report. 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."

In 2025, the 132nd Maine Legislature and the Mills administration in 2025 diverted $56 million away from the Salary Plan, which pays wages of Maine State Government 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 Maine 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. 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 comparable jobs in municipalities, other state governments in New England, and the private sector, and the consequences of these vacancies is more pressure on our members left doing all of the work, including workers at DACF. Our members are calling on you and your colleagues in the 132nd Maine Legislature to immediately restore the $56 million taken from it last year, and to do so as part of the budget deliberations on LD 2212.

This scheme of increasing the state employee attrition rate to raid the Salary Plan has worsened the recruitment and retention problem throughout Maine State Government, including at DACF. Understaffing throughout all state departments remains a serious problem often with devastating consequences on both state workers and Maine people who rely on their services.

Yet 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 they 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 over seven 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.

It's not too late for the 132nd Maine Legislature and Governor Mills to do the right thing. As you review the Governor's supplemental budget, please make the frontline staff – who carry out the laws and programs passed by the Legislature – a priority by dedicating surplus state revenues to help close the state employee pay gap. We recognize there are opportunities in this legislative session to generate revenue to meet such unmet needs, so we also respectfully ask that you show leadership in ensuring that the State of Maine has the revenues necessary for state workers to do their jobs. A failure to act will only make the problem harder and more expensive to solve, and the consequences more tragic. The time is now. Thank you and I'd be glad to answer any questions.