



Maine Water Environment Association Protecting Maine's Water Resources

January 17, 2022

Honorable Craig Hickman, Senate Chair
Honorable Mike Sylvester, House Chair
Joint Legislative Committee on Labor and Housing
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: *LD 555, An Act To Expand the Rights of Public Sector Employees*

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Legislative Committee on Labor and Housing:

The Maine Water Environment Association (MeWEA) appreciates the opportunity to provide the following testimony neither for nor against LD 555 and to provide concerns and comments about this proposed legislation.

About MeWEA. The Maine Water Environment Association is a non-profit, all volunteer association of over 650 members. MeWEA represents a diverse group of water quality professionals throughout Maine including wastewater treatment plant operators, sewer collection system operators, utility system administrators, consulting engineers, suppliers, contractors, public works officials, stormwater system operators, and regulatory officials. The mission of MeWEA is to support and enhance Maine's water environment community through promoting training opportunities; supporting balanced environmental policy and practice; and promoting education and collaboration with the public to protect and enhance Maine's water resources.

Discussion. Thank you for your time to carefully consider this legislation. As the Committee knows, water does not stop flowing. To properly function, water and wastewater systems rely on skilled personnel to daily operate, maintain, and repair critical treatment systems and functions. Throughout winter storms, extreme rain events, ice storms, and the like, our crews are out and responding to ensure the State retains its clean waters and our residents and businesses are offered the critical infrastructure services they have come to enjoy and expect.

Under current Maine law, public employees are not allowed to strike because of the risk to essential services to Maine people. LD 555 would give public employees a right to strike, but certain categories of essential workers are carved out. Importantly, from our perspective, LD 555 does not include water and wastewater personnel in the definition of those employees who are exempt from the right to strike, which exemption does cover police, fire, and other public safety personnel. In our view, employees of water and wastewater systems absolutely should be considered essential workers. Thousands of Maine residents and businesses rely on our State's drinking water and wastewater services, which are otherwise vulnerable to interruptions, service outages, and failures, any of which could have serious and longstanding consequences on public and environmental health.

If LD 555 does move forward, we implore the Legislature to expand the definition of those "protecting public safety" to include wastewater and water professionals. The basis for such action already exists in Governor Mills' Executive Order (An Order Regarding Essential Businesses and Operations) dated March 24, 2020, where it was clarified that wastewater and water utilities are classified as "essential businesses and operations."

If the definition of those “protecting public safety” is expanded to include wastewater and water personnel, it will ensure that critical drinking water and wastewater treatment systems are not impacted by strikes by public employees, and remain consistently operational.

Conclusion. MeWEA provides this testimony neither for nor against LD 555, but if the bill proceeds, we implore the Legislature to expand the definition of those “protecting public safety” to include water and wastewater professionals.

Sincerely,

Emily Cole-Prescott
Co-Chair
Government Affairs Committee

Amanda Smith
Co-Chair
Government Affairs Committee

cc: Dave Beauchamp, MeWEA President
James I. Cohen, Verrill Dana, LLP, Legislative Counsel