

Senator Tim Nangle
Representative Holly Stover
Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government
Via electronic submission
May 19, 2023

Dear Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the State and Local Government Committee,

Our organizations strongly support LD 1854, *An Act to Complete and Implement the Comprehensive Review of the Classification and Compensation System for Executive Branch Employees*. We believe that the completion and implementation of a comprehensive review of state employees' salaries is a necessary step to address a serious environmental challenge: inadequate staff at the state's natural resource agencies.

The natural world defines our state, from our beautiful coast to our vast forest, from our rugged mountains to our clear lakes and cold flowing rivers. Those resources support numerous industries: an \$11.6 billion agricultural industry, an \$8.1 billion forest products industry, a \$3.2 billion marine products industry, a \$2.8 billion outdoor recreation economy, and, of course, a \$7 billion tourism industry. Maine ranks in the top five states for percentage of the GDP attributable to outdoor recreation.

Our precious natural resources are safeguarded by the Departments of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry; Environmental Protection; Inland Fisheries and Wildlife; and Marine Resources. Critical, related programs reside within the Governor's Office of Policy, Innovation, and the Future; the Governor's Energy Office; Efficiency Maine; and the Maine Office of Outdoor Recreation. These agencies have long carried out their legislative charge while facing the challenges of inadequate funding and staffing. Without adequate staffing at state agencies, our natural resources suffer.

Today, we face serious issues. Climate change threatens our safety, public health, property, infrastructure, food systems – our very future. Biodiversity loss threatens the fragile ecosystems that are the basis of the industries named above as well as the foundation of life on earth. The prevalence of PFAS pollution threatens human and animal health as well as our agricultural heritage. We must reduce greenhouse gas emissions, develop clean energy, and manage development pressures without losing Maine's remarkable quality of life and valuable open space.

We hear again and again that state agencies are unable to fill key positions due to uncompetitive salary levels. Qualified applicants are selecting jobs outside of state government with more security and better pay. This is not surprising, given that repeated compensation studies have found state employees are underpaid by an average of 15%, and far more for many positions.

State agencies are challenged to carry out the important work with which they have been charged. According to a March 27 article in the *Bangor Daily News*, nearly one in six state jobs is unfilled.¹ The situation has become untenable.

Examples of which we are aware include:

¹<https://www.bangordailynews.com/2023/03/27/politics/maine-state-jobs-unfilled-snow-fighter-caseworkers-joam40zk0w/>

- The Department of Environment Protection (DEP) has struggled to address the serious issue of PFAS contamination due to turnover in staff charged with maintaining data and lack of staff focused on rulemaking and implementation in the Safer Chemicals program.
- Numerous vacancies at the DEP are impacting the ability to review and issue water quality permits and licensing.
- DEP has two vacant environmental engineer/assistant environmental engineer positions in the Bureau of Land Resources, one of which has been vacant for a year.
- The Bureau of Parks and Lands is looking to fill park positions in anticipation of a busy summer season. An Assistant Park Ranger and a Park Receptionist each start at \$15/hour. At Crescent Beach/Kettle Cove/Two Lights State Park, 14 of 20 positions are vacant. This may cause the Bureau to have to curtail hours and services at one of the most popular state parks. Park managers throughout the system fear safety issues as a result of understaffing.
- The Maine Forest Service has struggled to fill forester positions as well as a Forest Carbon Specialist charged with developing training modules for landowners, loggers, and foresters on climate-friendly forest management practices and being a source of information on forest carbon for stakeholders and the public.
- The position of Director of the Land for Maine's Future program, a popular and essential grant program, is open. Multiple qualified individuals have declined to apply due to the low salary.
- The Land Use Planning Commission, which serves as the planning, zoning, and code enforcement agency for Maine's 10.5 million-acre Unorganized Territories, has struggled to fill frontline positions, and is thus challenged to prevent or remediate violations, such as structures built without a permit or vegetation clearing that puts at risk water quality in remote lakes and ponds. Time spent on backlogs of work means the agency cannot focus as much on proactive planning and landowner education.

These are just a few examples of the kinds of work affected by the state's inability to attract and retain a qualified workforce. We ask you to give LD 1845 a unanimous vote of Ought to Pass to speed the process of addressing the staffing challenges at our natural resource agencies. Effective management of our land, water, and wildlife depends on it.

Sincerely,



CC: Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs; Legislative leadership

