

April 2, 2021

Erica Ortega
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Dear Director Ortega,

I am writing to you as a brand-new state employee; I have been with the state for exactly one month. I come to the state with a PhD in a STEM field, postdoctoral experience, and nearly five years in industry. I was very excited for my new job regulating chemicals, where I get to keep people and the environment safe. The overall mission and work of my agency reflects the value that I want to bring to my job every day.

Based on my education and experience, I am qualified for a senior environmental scientist position, or a staff toxicologist position. But I jumped at the opportunity when I saw a listing for environmental scientist, in a program that fit my background. I can say confidently that it is well known that government salaries are lower than industry. I was willing to take a pay cut for a job that I feel passionate about. However, the pay cut exceeded even my expectations. For someone coming from industry with my level of education and experience, the pay cut for an environmental scientist in range C is 30 – 50%. This is huge!

As I mentioned, I expected a pay cut moving from industry to government. But the pay cut I have taken to do work I believe in, is not a living wage in the state of California. In the Bay Area, where many state employees live, and where median home prices are 1.1 million dollars, it is not possible to own a home on a salary less than \$100,000. This has been supported by numerous reports issued in 2021. This is a really depressing fact. How can anyone save money for emergencies, or save for their children's college education in a state with such a high priced cost of living? I would have thought someone with a PhD in a STEM field would be able to manage this high cost of living, but the salary cut I took essentially removes any and all savings from my budget. Essentially, now that I am a state employee, I can only make ends meet. I will not save any money in 2021. Even with a small raise, I will not save any money in 2022. How do I save for life emergencies? How do I save money to get on an airplane and visit my family in another state? Any large and unexpected expense means that I have to dip into my savings, and that I cannot then replenish my savings. I'd like to be quite frank with you – I am quite frugal, so I really do mean that for someone that typically does not live beyond their means, the environmental scientist salary is un-livable.

I can appreciate that this scenario might be realistic for many people coming straight from an undergraduate degree, and working their way up through state employment. Young professionals do not yet have mortgage payments, or families (well, in some cases they do). But

for someone in their mid to late 30s, who brings a wealth of experience and education to their job, this salary is certainly not acceptable. In fact, it is very disrespectful.

Within my specific program, engineers and environmental scientists work side by side, doing the same work. Since I do the same work as engineers, I demand equal pay. Engineers have had their salaries adjusted, and managers and supervisors have also had their salaries adjusted. The message this sends is loud and clear: environmental scientists don't matter. Our quality of life doesn't matter. The work I do doesn't matter. As a brand-new state employee, this really hurts. I joined to make a difference, to keep people safe, to do good with my years of education and experience. Yet I am living paycheck to paycheck.

Director Ortega, I came to the state because I passionately believe in the work. Do not punish me by denying me a quality of life that allows me to take care of more than only the most basic and necessary needs. I wholeheartedly believe that you will do the right thing, and will pay environmental scientists equal pay for their work.

Thank you,

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