October 9, 2017

The Honorable Rob Bishop, Chairman
The Honorable Raúl Grijalva, Ranking Member
House Natural Resources Committee
United States House of Representatives
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: H.R. 3144 - Providing for operations of the Federal Columbia River Power System

Dear Representatives Bishop and Grijalva:

I am writing on behalf of the Alaska Trollers Association (ATA) to inform you of our strong opposition to H.R. 3144, due to concerns that it will impose additional, deleterious impacts on already imperiled salmon stocks in the Columbia River Basin. Any reduction of the productivity of those stocks will harm fishermen and fishing communities from California to Alaska, including members of ATA.

ATA represents hook and line commercial salmon fishermen and support sector businesses that operate in Southeast Alaska. Some of our members and associated businesses also live and operate in Washington and other Lower 48 states. As you may know, Chinook salmon harvest in our region is tightly controlled by the Pacific Salmon Commission (PSC), which is the implementing body of the Pacific Salmon Treaty (treaty). Our catch is restricted on an annual basis, to help conserve southern stocks including those from the Columbia River Basin. Our fleet is highly dependent on Columbia River Basin salmon and, according to recent PSC documents, those stocks comprised a full 50 percent of the 2013 Alaska Chinook salmon harvest. The impact of treaty harvest restrictions on our fishery is significant and has often been disruptive; therefore we are concerned about, and have a vested interest in, salmon conservation and recovery efforts in the Columbia River Basin.

If passed into law, this bill will circumvent important research and public processes that guide the operations of the Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) as it relates to the recovery and conservation of salmon resources. H.R. 3144 also seeks to block recent rulings and orders from the U.S. District Court in Portland regarding salmon saving measures, like increased spill at federal dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers.

H.R. 3144 removes the option to spill water at the dams above the levels specified in the 2014 Endangered Species Act Biological Opinion. Spilling water at the dams is a science-based measure timed to aid in the passage and survival of out-migrating juvenile fish. The Court ordered additional spill because it is a proven and highly effective means to increase salmon survival. That spill helped to boost juvenile outmigration and the benefits were observed in 2013-2015, when those fish returned as adults in numbers far higher than anything seen since the first dam was placed in the 1930’s. H.R. 3144 would
eliminate the court-ordered spill. ATA strongly supports the continued use of enhanced spill to improve salmon runs and help to mitigate the fishing community for losses incurred as a result of the dams.

H.R. 3144 requires that any further study of dam operations be authorized by Congress, including those that may lead to operational improvements to assist migrating salmon. Such a system would be cumbersome, regressive, and doesn’t allow for the creative problem solving that is necessary to improve fish passage and respond to such things as the increased water temperatures seen in recent years. This is effectively a legislative straight jacket that prevents implementation of any existing options that may have been demonstrated to aid in salmon recovery; and, provides a disincentive for new research and development that could lead to additional design and operational improvements. This makes little sense, since such advancements could both improve fish survival and help to better balance the needs of the fishing community with those of the other interests that rely on water use and power generation.

We urge you to oppose H.R. 3144. Columbia River Basin salmon are critical to the social and economic health and well-being of the coastwide fishing community, including southeast Alaska. Decisions affecting these fish are better placed with those who are most familiar with both the stocks and the constituents who rely upon them. Balancing the wide variety of uses in the Columbia River system is a process better suited for local involvement, not the halls of Congress.

Thank you for considering our point of view. If I can answer questions or otherwise be of assistance on this or other matters, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Best regards,

Dale Kelley
Executive Director

Cc:
The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
The Honorable Dan Sullivan
The Honorable Don Young