October 11, 2017

The Honorable Chairman Rob Bishop
The Honorable Ranking Member Raul Grijalva
Subcommittee on Water, Power and Energy
House Natural Resources Committee
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Greetings Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Grijalva,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comment for the record regarding HR 3144 as part of the hearing before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee for Water, Power and Oceans. We are submitting these comments as the Orca Salmon Alliance (OSA). The Alliance is working to prevent the extinction of Southern Resident Killer Whales by recovering wild Chinook salmon populations upon which the whales depend for survival. Our partnership includes over three million members and advocates in the following organizations: Center for Whale Research, Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Earthjustice, Endangered Species Coalition, Natural Resources Defense Council, Oceana, Orca Network, Puget Soundkeeper Alliance, Save Our wild Salmon, Sierra Club, Washington Environmental Council, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, and Whale Scout.

OSA strongly opposes HR 3144 and urges subcommittee members to oppose this bill as well. Our reasons are straightforward: HR 3144 will significantly harm Columbia Basin Chinook salmon populations and their prospects for recovery. Diminished salmon runs have significantly harmed the critically endangered Southern Resident Killer Whales, which depend on Columbia and Snake River Chinook salmon for their survival, particularly during the winter months. The
research is unambiguous: Southern Resident Killer Whales need access to many more Chinook salmon in order to reverse their current downward population spiral.

HR 3144 seeks to overturn two recent decisions by the U.S. District Court in Portland. The first decision invalidated the federal government’s inadequate 2014 Columbia Basin Salmon Plan. The second ordered improved dam operations/river conditions – increased spring spill at federal dams on the lower Columbia and lower Snake rivers – starting in 2018. Strongly supported by science, additional spill will provide much-needed immediate help for critically imperiled salmon populations and starving orcas. This is a necessary step to take while our region works to produce a long-term, legally valid, scientifically-credible, and fiscally-responsible Columbia Basin salmon plan. In his ruling, Judge Michael Simon ordered the federal agencies in charge to produce a new plan by December 2018 and to complete a full and fair National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Review by 2021.

HR 3144 would specifically cripple this NEPA Review by preventing the study of any actions that might reduce energy production by the federal hydro-system, including spill and the removal of the lower Snake River dams. The comprehensive development of updated information and examination of all reasonable salmon restoration alternatives including their costs, benefits and tradeoffs is essential for regional sovereigns and stakeholders to work together to craft an effective plan that both restores wild salmon and works for affected communities and interests.

For these reasons, the Orca Salmon Alliance strongly opposes HR 3144 and we urge the members of this subcommittee to do so as well. By thwarting salmon restoration progress in the Columbia-Snake River Basin, HR 3144 threatens the continued existence of Southern Resident Killer Whales.

Finally, in support of this letter and our position on this bill, we are attaching a number of documents (OSA NEPA Review Scoping Comments, scientific articles, and links to relevant media coverage) concerning the status and ecology of the Southern Resident Killer Whales and their relationships with healthy and abundant Chinook salmon populations in the Northwest marine waters that they have called home for hundreds of thousands of years.

We greatly appreciate this opportunity to help inform this subcommittee’s consideration of HR 3144. If OSA can be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us. We stand ready to help.

Sincerely,

Shawn Cantrell, Northwest Regional Director, Defenders of Wildlife
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(1) ATTACHMENTS:

(A) OSA NEPA Scoping Comments (February 2017)

(B) Science article: Population growth is limited by nutritional impacts on pregnancy success in endangered Southern Resident killer whales (Orcinus orca) (June 2017)

(2) LINKS TO FURTHER INFORMATION:

(A) Bellingham Herald Guest Opinion: Survival of endangered orcas in the Salish Sea depends on restoring chinook (Feb. 2015)

(B) NW Public Radio: Puget Sound's Southern Resident Orca Population Drops To 30-Year Low (Sept. 2017)

(C) Idaho Statesman: Fate of Northwest orcas tied to having Columbia River Salmon (May 2017)

(D) Seattle Times: A new study nails dearth of chinook salmon as the primary cause of the endangered resident orca whale’s failure to rebound. (June 2017)

(E) Seattle Times Guest Opinion: Hungry killer whales waiting for Columbia River salmon (March 2016)
https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/hungry-killer-whales-waiting-for-columbia-river-salmon/