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ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED FISHERMEN OF ALASKA

BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES  
ON MAY 24, 2005

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to provide our views on the federal fish hatchery system and the overall contribution of hatcheries to the health and sustainability of Alaska's salmon resource.

Perhaps no issue is of greater importance to the long-term stability of Alaska's commercial salmon industry than its hatchery program. Hatchery contributions to commercial salmon fisheries in Alaska have grown from a few thousand fish in the mid-1970's to over 40 million last year. Today hatchery production accounts for 25% of the total salmon harvested in Alaska. And in some areas, such as Prince William Sound, hatchery fish now make up the majority of the harvest.

The Alaska fishing industry has long supported hatchery programs in Alaska. Most salmon fishermen pay a 3% tax on all salmon catches to fund hatchery construction and operations. We firmly believe that hatcheries, with proper design and regulation, provide an excellent means to enhance and restore salmon.

As you well know, responsibility for the protection and management of fish resources in the United States is shared by state agencies and several federal agencies, especially the Fish & Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service. To this end, the federal government has operated fish hatcheries since 1871.

During most of the history of federal fish hatcheries, the desirability of producing fish was not questioned by resource managers and was deemed consistent with sound environmental principles. In the early 1990's, however, many claimed that federal hatchery programs, and particularly salmon hatcheries, were not properly focused on recovery and restoration programs. You may recall a 1999 GAO report prepared at the request of Representative Miller concluded that federal agencies were wildly overstating the benefits of salmon hatcheries. To their credit, these agencies initiated a comprehensive review of hatchery activities to ensure that hatchery uses are consistent with agency policies and statutory laws.

Although hatchery practices must be subject to ongoing review, we believe much of the controversy surrounding this issue is unwarranted. In particular, we hear the misguided claim that salmon hatcheries are only a substitute for addressing the real reasons for declines in fish resources such as habitat destruction, pollution and dam construction; or that hatchery fish place wild fish at risk. This is wholly inconsistent with the Alaskan experience. Almost every hatchery in Alaska is located in a remote wilderness setting that is accessible only by boat or floatplane. Alaska's current hatchery program has enhanced salmon populations for over 30 years, without detecting adverse impacts on wild salmon, which are at record levels of production. In fact, our analysis suggests that variable conditions in the marine environment—and not hatchery practices—have a far greater impact on wild salmon production. Our hatcheries provide a wonderful tool to supplement, but not supplant, our wild salmon and will remain the lynchpin of a stable and economically viable salmon industry.

Federal salmon hatcheries are largely concentrated in the Northwest—although Alaska has one facility at Little Port Walter in southeastern Alaska. The catalyst for these hatcheries was the 1938 Mitchell Act, which provided for aggressive construction of hatcheries as a way of replacing the thousands of acres of salmon spawning grounds that were blocked or flooded behind dams. Today there are 18 Mitchell Act hatcheries operating in the Columbia River Basin. Later in the 1970's Congress provided federal money to construct hatcheries along the Oregon coast and throughout Washington to increase salmon populations in response to federal court decisions defining Indian fishing rights secured under federal treaties.

More recently, these federal salmon hatcheries have become vital to meet our obligations under the recently renegotiated U.S. – Canada Pacific Salmon Treaty Act. This bilateral agreement provides the framework to guide management and harvest allocations, taking into account the transboundary nature of their respective salmon resources.

An estimated 1 million chinook and coho salmon from federal hatcheries are annually harvested in sport, commercial and tribal fisheries occurring in Alaska, British Columbia and throughout the Northwest. Without a continuation or future expansion of this hatchery production, Salmon Treaty guidelines would likely determine that insufficient salmon are returning to the Columbia River Basin. Because a relatively small but measurable percentage of Columbia River salmon are taken in Alaska fisheries, such a determination would necessarily curtail Alaska's fisheries. Consequently, Alaska would be unable

to harvest its otherwise abundant and sustainable salmon resources. This would be an unthinkable outcome.

We strongly believe that federal salmon hatcheries in the Northwest are essential to meet our nation's responsibilities for stewardship of the resource and our treaty obligations –both tribal and international. Of course we recognize that hatcheries will remain controversial. For this reason, we support any effort to encourage ongoing analysis of hatchery performance and technological exchanges among state, tribal and federal hatchery professionals.