Effects of Environmental Salinity on Global and Endocrine-Specific Transcriptomic Profiles in the Caudal Neurosecretory System of Salmonid Fishes

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Abstract

The caudal neurosecretory system (CNSS) is a fish-specific neuroendocrine complex whose function(s) remain uncertain despite 60+ years of research. Osmoregulatory roles for the CNSS have been hypothesized, but molecular regulation of the CNSS following changes in environmental salinity remains poorly characterized. Therefore, we performed transcriptomics on the CNSS of rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) to establish: 1) how the CNSS responds following seawater (SW) transfer, and 2) which endocrine systems contribute to osmoregulatory responses in the CNSS. Responses following SW transfer varied at 24 h versus 168 h, with changes primarily affecting membrane transport and transcriptional processes at 24 h and neuronal processes at 168 h. Components of several osmoregulation-associated endocrine systems were affected (e.g., corticosteroid receptors), including some which have not previously been identified in the CNSS (e.g., calcitonin). Additionally, transcript levels of corticotropin-releasing factor (CRF) peptides—which have osmoregulatory functions and were highly abundant in the CNSS—were ~2-fold higher after 24 h in SW. Therefore, we performed additional experiments investigating CRF peptides in a more euryhaline salmonid, Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*). Smolts had up to 12-fold higher levels of CRF peptide transcripts than parr, but abundance declined following SW transfer. Additionally, CRF transcripts were lower 24 h following freshwater transfer of SW-acclimated salmon. These results suggest that CRF peptides acutely aid in coordinating physiological responses following fluctuations in environmental salinity via anticipatory and/or responsive mechanisms. Collectively, our data indicate that CNSS-mediated production of CRF peptides has osmoregulatory functions and provide a resource for investigations of novel CNSS functions.

Keywords: corticotropin-releasing hormone; neuropeptides; neurosecretory systems; *Oncorhynchus mykiss*; osmoregulation; *Salmo salar*; transcriptome.

47 **1. Introduction**

48 The caudal neurosecretory system (CNSS) is a neuroendocrine complex that is located at
49 the distal tip of the spinal cord in fishes. In teleosts, the CNSS is comprised of neurosecretory
50 cells (i.e., Dahlgren cells) whose axons project towards capillary beds located in the caudal
51 vertebrae and converge to form a neurohemal organ called the urophysis (Bern and Takasugi,
52 1962; Chan and Bern, 1976; Rousseau et al., 2024). The urophysis was first anatomically
53 described in the early 1800s (Weber, 1827), but the presence of enlarged neurosecretory cells in
54 the caudal spinal cord was not noted until about 100 years later (Dahlgren, 1914). Ultimately,
55 these observations provided the groundwork for the later development of the CNSS as an
56 endocrine complex (Enami, 1959). While the importance of the CNSS in the field of
57 endocrinology is cemented owing to the eponymous naming of two peptide hormones that were
58 first identified in and isolated from the CNSS—a peptide in the corticotropin-releasing factor
59 (CRF) family [urotensin 1, UTS1; (Lederis et al., 1982)] and a peptide in the somatostatin family
60 [urotensin 2, UTS2; (Pearson et al., 1980)]—specific functional roles for this unique
61 neuroendocrine complex remain unclear 60+ years later.

62 The CNSS has been hypothesized to contribute to several physiological processes,
63 including reproduction, stress responses, cardiovascular regulation, and thermal adaptation (Chan
64 and Bern, 1976; Munro, 1995; Yuan et al., 2020a). However, the greatest attention has been
65 given to the role of the CNSS during changes in environmental salinity. Early studies noted that
66 the size and content of neurosecretory cells in the CNSS changed following changes in salinity
67 (Chevalier, 1976; Enami, 1956; Takasugi and Bern, 1962), and removal of the CNSS reduced the
68 ability of some species to acclimate to altered salinities (Ireland, 1969; Takasugi and Bern,
69 1962). These osmoregulatory actions were hypothesized to be mediated by products synthesized

70 within the CNSS because injection of urophysial extracts induced osmoregulatory responses
71 (Enami et al., 1956; Fryer et al., 1978; Takasugi and Bern, 1962). Furthermore, changes in either
72 the external (Ashworth et al., 2005; Yagi and Bern, 1963) or internal (Bennett and Fox, 1962;
73 Yagi and Bern, 1965) osmotic environment affect the electrical activity of neurons within the
74 CNSS. However, responses vary depending on changes in specific ions. For example, neurons in
75 the CNSS of tilapia (*Oreochromis mossambicus*) can be separated into those that increase firing
76 rates when exposed to high Na^+ and those that respond when Na^+ levels are low, but responses to
77 Na^+ levels appear to be regulated by the brain and not the CNSS directly (Yagi and Bern, 1965).
78 In contrast, the presence of Ca^{+2} sensing receptors on Dahlgren cells (Greenwood et al., 2009;
79 Ingleton et al., 2002), as well as high transcript levels of the calcium-regulating hormones
80 parathyroid hormone-related peptide [PTHrP; (Ingleton et al., 2002; Lu et al., 2017)] and
81 stanniocalcin-1 [STC-1; (Greenwood et al., 2009)] in the CNSS of flounder (*Platichthys flesus*)
82 suggests that the CNSS can directly sense changes in internal Ca^{+2} levels and participates in Ca^{+2}
83 regulation. Yet, the generalizability of these findings is limited because most work on the CNSS
84 has focused on only a handful of species. Furthermore, despite a solid understanding of the
85 electrophysiological responses displayed by the CNSS in response to changes in environmental
86 salinity, transcriptional regulation of the CNSS following salinity changes is still poorly
87 understood.

88 Many of the osmoregulatory effects described above were later attributed to changes in
89 production of UTS1 and/or UTS2 by the CNSS (Arnold-Reed et al., 1991; Minniti et al., 1989).
90 However, changes in the synthesis and release of these hormones by the CNSS—as well as
91 specific osmoregulatory actions of UTS1 and UTS2 across different epithelial tissues (Chan,
92 1975; Loretz et al., 1981; Mainoya and Bern, 1982; Marshall and Bern, 1981)—often vary

93 among species, likely reflecting species-specific osmoregulatory ability and interactions with
94 other hormone and neurotransmitter systems. Indeed, in addition to synthesizing UTS1 and
95 UTS2, the CNSS also contains large amounts of CRFb (Alderman and Bernier, 2009; Craig et
96 al., 2005; Lu et al., 2004) and PTHrP (Ingleton et al., 2002; Lu et al., 2017), as well as smaller
97 amounts of arginine vasotocin/vasopressin (AVP), isotocin/oxytocin, and urocortin's 2 & 3 in
98 some species (Gozdowska et al., 2013; Grone et al., 2021; Harding et al., 1997; Holder et al.,
99 1979; Hosono et al., 2017; Lacanilao, 1972; Parmentier et al., 2008). Furthermore, the presence
100 of descending peptidergic nerve fibers—as well as cholinergic, adrenergic, and serotonergic
101 fibers (Audet and Chevalier, 1981; Conlon and Balment, 1996; Hubbard et al., 1996; McKeon et
102 al., 1988; Yulis et al., 1990)—that exhibit positive staining for GnRH (Miller and Kriebel, 1986;
103 Xia et al., 2015; Yamamoto et al., 1995) and NPY (Oka et al., 1997), as well as receptors for
104 CRF and UTS1, UTS2, cortisol, prolactin, and GnRH (Lu et al., 2007) indicate that the CNSS is
105 likely a major endocrine player in fishes. However, the full complement of endocrine factors
106 produced in the CNSS—and the suite of hormone systems which contribute to the regulation of
107 the CNSS—remains uncertain.

108 In the current study, we conducted the first transcriptomic assessment of how the CNSS
109 responds following changes in environmental salinity. Specifically, we evaluated changes either
110 24 or 168 h following transfer of rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) from freshwater (FW) to
111 seawater (SW). We used rainbow trout because they are euryhaline, and previous work has
112 shown that the CNSS is responsive to osmoregulatory changes in rainbow trout and other
113 salmonids (Chevalier, 1976; Craig et al., 2005; Larson and Madani, 1996; Nishioka et al., 1982).
114 Another major focus of the current study was to identify which components of different
115 endocrine systems are present in the transcriptome of the rainbow trout CNSS to shed light on

116 potential novel endocrine functions and/or regulators of this tissue, especially those involved in
117 osmoregulatory processes. While a previous study (Yuan et al., 2021) used a transcriptomics
118 approach to evaluate whether responses of the CNSS following a temperature change varied
119 between bold and shy olive flounder (*Paralichthys olivaceus*), they did not describe the
120 transcriptome of the CNSS in detail. Thus, the full complement of endocrine systems present in
121 the CNSS remains unclear. We also performed several additional experiments to determine how
122 environmental salinity affects transcript levels of CRF peptides (specifically, CRFb and UTS1)
123 in the CNSS. We focused on the CRF system because: 1) CRF peptides are abundant in the
124 CNSS (Bernier et al., 2008; Lu et al., 2004); 2) transcript and protein levels of CRF peptides in
125 the CNSS often vary following changes in environmental salinity (Craig et al., 2005; Lu et al.,
126 2004; Zhu et al., 2019); and 3) the CRF system has conserved osmoregulatory functions (Cannell
127 et al., 2016; Loretz et al., 1981; Mainoya and Bern, 1982; Marshall and Bern, 1981; Stengel and
128 Taché, 2009). For some of these experiments, we used Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) because
129 they are anadromous [i.e., migrate between FW and SW as part of their natural life history
130 (McCormick, 2012; Zydlewski and Wilkie, 2012)], offering the opportunity to evaluate how
131 CRF peptide synthesis in the CNSS is affected by environmental salinity under more
132 ecologically relevant conditions. Specifically, we investigated how transcript levels of CRF
133 peptides changed: 1) during the seasonal acquisition of SW tolerance as salmon transform from
134 pre-migratory parr into migratory smolts (i.e., smoltification); 2) in response to SW transfer of
135 FW-acclimated parr and smolts; and 3) in response to FW transfer of SW-acclimated post-
136 smolts.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Experimental Animals and Housing

Experiments 1 and 3 took place at the Hagen Aqualab at the University of Guelph (Guelph, ON, Canada) using either rainbow trout (Exp. 1) or Atlantic salmon (Exp 3) that were ~3 years old. Rainbow trout were acquired from the Ontario Aquaculture Research Centre (Alma, ON, Canada), while Atlantic salmon were acquired from the Normandale Fish Culture Station (Vittoria, ON, Canada). Both species were maintained in 1.8 m diameter fibreglass tanks (~2000L) that were supplied with aerated, flow-through well water at 12°C and kept on a 12h light, 12h dark photoperiod regime. Fish were fed to satiation 3 times per week with commercial pellets (Blue Water Fish Food; Guelph, ON, Canada). A stocking density of ~100 fish per tank was maintained and fish were kept under these conditions for several months prior to starting experiments. All procedures were carried out in accordance with the Canadian Council for Animal Care guidelines for the use of animals in research and teaching and were approved by the University of Guelph's Animal Care Committee (AUP #4123).

Experiment 2 took place at the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) S.O. Conte Anadromous Fish Research Laboratory (Turners Falls, MA, USA) using ~1 year old juvenile Atlantic salmon that were obtained from the Kensington State Hatchery (Kensington, CT, USA) in the Fall of 2018. Fish were held in 1.8 m diameter tanks that were supplied with flow-through ambient Connecticut River water at a flow rate of 4 L min^{-1}, and tanks were continuously aerated. Fish were maintained under the natural photoperiod and were fed to satiation (BioOregon; Westbrook, ME, USA) using automatic feeders. In December of 2018, fish were separated by size into parr and pre-smolt groups as described previously (Culbert et al., 2022). Each group of fish was maintained in duplicate tanks containing ~100 fish, and all fish experienced identical

160 temperature regimes throughout the experiment. All fish rearing and sampling protocols were
161 carried out in accordance with USGS institutional guidelines and protocol LSC-9096, which was
162 approved by the USGS Eastern Ecological Science Center Institutional Animal Care and Use
163 Committee.

164 **2.2. Experiment 1: Regulation of the CNSS following FW-to-SW transfer of rainbow trout**

165 **2.2.1. Experimental Details**

166 Fifty-eight trout (mass = 545 ± 14 g; fork length = 35.0 ± 0.3 cm; mean ± SEM) were
167 moved from the stock tank and randomly placed into one of six 2000L recirculating tanks (N=8-
168 10 fish per tank). Three tanks contained well water (FW) and three contained SW (35ppt, Instant
169 Ocean Sea Salt; Blacksburg, VA, USA). Each tank received continuous aeration via an air stone
170 and was equipped with both particle and biological filtration, as well as UV sterilization. Groups
171 of fish were sampled either 24, 72, or 168 h following transfer and no mortalities occurred. Food
172 was withheld throughout the experiment because salmonids naturally suppress food intake
173 following transfer to SW (Arnesen et al., 1993; Craig et al., 2005; Damsgård and Arnesen, 1998;
174 Usher et al., 1991). All fish were killed between 1000 and 1200 h via terminal anaesthesia using
175 buffered MS-222 (100 mg L^{-1}, Syndel; Vancouver, BC, Canada). Fork length and mass were
176 recorded, blood was collected from the caudal vasculature using a 1 mL ammonium heparinized
177 syringe and was spun at 9,000 *g* for 5 min. Most fish (>80%) were still juvenile and therefore sex
178 was not included in our analyses. After this, plasma was collected, frozen on dry ice, and stored
179 at -80°C for later determination of osmolality and cortisol levels. To sample the CNSS, we
180 collected all spinal tissue from the five most caudal vertebrae and the urostyle. Following
181 dissection, the CNSS was frozen on dry ice, and stored at -80°C for later extraction of RNA (see
182 section 2.5) to be used for RNA-Seq (see section 2.7) and quantitative polymerase chain reaction

183 (qPCR; see section 2.6). A portion of the CNSS was lost while dissecting one of the 7 d SW-
184 transferred fish, resulting in N = 7 for this group.

185 **2.3. Experiment 2: Transcriptional regulation of CRF peptides in the CNSS during**
186 **smoltification and FW–to-SW transfer of juvenile Atlantic salmon**

187 **2.3.1. Experimental Details**

188 Twelve parr and twelve smolts were randomly sampled on February 19th, April 1st, and
189 May 6th in 2019. Fish were kept at ambient temperatures (2-4°C) through the winter and water
190 temperature was increased by 1°C per day until 8-10°C was reached on February 15.
191 Temperature was kept the same throughout the experiment so that all fish were sampled at
192 identical temperatures. To avoid potential tank effects, fish from each group (parr or smolts)
193 were sampled from two separate tanks at each timepoint (N=6 per tank). To determine the
194 response of fish following SW exposure, groups of parr and smolts were randomly selected and
195 placed into six 1 m diameter tanks (3 tanks of parr and 3 tanks of smolts) containing 28 ppt
196 recirculating SW (Instant Ocean Sea Salt) during the week of May 6th, 2019, which is the peak
197 of smolt development for this population under these conditions (McCormick et al., 2013). These
198 tanks were held at 8.5-9.5°C and contained particle, biological, and charcoal filtration, as well as
199 continuous aeration. Fish were fed to satiation every day, but food was withheld the day prior to
200 samplings. Twelve parr and twelve smolts were sampled after 24, 96, and 240 h of SW exposure
201 and no mortalities occurred. All fish were killed via terminal anesthesia using buffered MS-222
202 (100 mg L^{-1}) after which fork length and mass were recorded. All fish were juvenile and
203 therefore sex could not be determined. Blood was collected from the caudal vasculature using a 1
204 mL ammonium heparinized syringe, spun at 3,200 g for 5 min at 4°C, and plasma was collected
205 for later measurement of cortisol and osmolality. Given the small size of these fish, the CNSS

206 was fixed prior to removal from the spinal column to prevent tissue loss. All muscle was
207 removed from the caudal spinal column (consisting of the five most caudal vertebrae and the
208 urostyle) and the spinal column was placed in a solution of 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA) in
209 phosphate-buffered saline (PBS; pH 7.4) for 24 h at 4°C. The following day, the CNSS was
210 removed from the spinal column and RNA was extracted following the protocol of Craig et al.
211 (2005) for later qPCR analysis (see section 2.6).

212 **2.4. Experiment 3: Transcriptional regulation of CRF peptides in the CNSS during SW–to-**
213 **FW transfer of post-smolt Atlantic salmon**

214 **2.4.1. Experimental Details**

215 Salmon (N= 28; fork length: 37.8 ± 0.6 cm, mass: 537.8 ± 24.0 g) were held in a
216 recirculating tank which contained ~2000L of SW (33ppt; Instant Ocean Sea Salt) for
217 approximately 6 months. This tank was continuously aerated with an air stone and was equipped
218 with both particle and biological filtration, as well as UV sterilization. At the start of the
219 experiment, N=10 salmon were immediately sampled while the remaining fish were randomly
220 split among two ~500L tanks containing aerated, flow-through well water (FW; N=9 per tank).
221 After either 24 h or 96 h in FW, fish were terminally anesthetized using phenoxyethanol (0.2%)
222 and their plasma (for cortisol and osmolality) and CNSS (for qPCR; see section 2.6) were
223 collected as previously described. We also sampled FW-acclimated salmon (N=10; fork length:
224 39.4 ± 1.0 cm, mass: 581.3 ± 42.3 g) for comparison (see section 2.1 for housing conditions). No
225 mortalities occurred following FW transfer and all treatment groups contained approximately
226 equal proportions of females and males (53% male and 47% female combined).

227 **2.5. Plasma Cortisol and Osmolality Measurements**

228 Plasma osmolality values were determined in duplicate using a Vapro 5520 vapour
229 pressure osmometer (Wescor; Logan, UT, USA) and had an intra-assay variation of 8.3%
230 coefficient of variation (CV). Circulating cortisol levels were determined using a commercially
231 available enzyme immunoassay (Neogen, Cat # 402710; Lexington, KY, USA) for experiments
232 1 and 3, or a previously validated direct competitive enzyme immunoassay (Carey and
233 McCormick, 1998) for experiment 2. Intra- and inter-assay variation was 8.2% and 13.1% CV,
234 respectively.

235 **2.6. RNA Isolation and qPCR**

236 The entire CNSS of fish from experiments 1 and 3 was homogenized in TRIzol reagent
237 (Invitrogen; Burlington, ON, Canada) using a Precellys Evolution tissue homogenizer (Bertin
238 Instruments; Montigny-le-Bretonneux, France) and total RNA was extracted as per the
239 manufacturer's directions (see Craig et al., 2005 for details of RNA extraction of CNSS samples
240 from experiment 2). The quantity and purity of RNA samples was assessed using a NanoDrop
241 2000 spectrophotometer (Thermo Scientific; Mississauga, ON, Canada). Following this, we
242 treated 1µg of RNA with DNase (DNase 1; Thermo Scientific) and reverse transcribed cDNA
243 using a high-capacity Applied Biosystems cDNA reverse transcription kit (Thermo Scientific).
244 We then performed qPCR using a CFX96 system (BioRad; Hercules, CA, USA) with SYBR
245 green (SsoAdvanced Universal; BioRad) and gene-specific primers (Table 1). All samples were
246 run in duplicate and negative controls—including no template controls (where cDNA was
247 replaced with water) and no reverse transcriptase controls (where RNA reverse transcriptase was
248 replaced with water during cDNA synthesis)—were also included. Each reaction contained a
249 total of 20 µl, which consisted of 10 µl of SYBR green, 5 µl of combined forward and reverse
250 primers (0.2 µM [final]), and 5 µl of 10x diluted cDNA. Cycling parameters included a 30 s

251 activation step at 95°C, followed by 40 cycles consisting of a 3 s denaturation step at 95°C and a
252 combined 30 s annealing and extension step at 60°C. Melt curve analysis was conducted at the
253 end of each run to confirm the specificity of each reaction. To account for differences in
254 amplification efficiency, standard curves were constructed for each gene using serial dilutions
255 (4x) of pooled cDNA. Input values for each gene were obtained by fitting the average threshold
256 cycle value to the antilog of the gene-specific standard curve, thereby correcting for differences
257 in primer amplification efficiency. To correct for minor variations in template input and
258 transcriptional efficiency, we normalized our data to the geometric mean of transcript
259 abundances of elongation factor 1α (*ef1α*) and ribosomal protein L13a (*rpl13a*) as reference
260 genes. While reference genes were stable across treatments in experiments 1 and 3, expression of
261 reference genes varied between sampling times in experiment 2. To account for differences in
262 reference gene expression across time, the geometric mean of the reference genes within each
263 group of samples was normalized to a "control" group (parr in February) using a correction
264 factor (mean value within a group/mean value of control group) as previously described (Billiau
265 et al., 2001; Essex-Fraser et al., 2005). All data are expressed relative to the mean value of the
266 control group within each experiment (see figure captions for further details).

267 **2.7. RNA-Seq**

268 To evaluate both acute and chronic responses of the rainbow trout CNSS during SW
269 acclimation, we conducted RNA-Seq on FW-to-FW (control) and FW-to-SW transferred fish
270 (N=7-9 per group) either 24 or 168 h post-transfer. Total RNA (see section 2.6) was sent to the
271 Génome Québec Centre of Expertise and Services (Montreal, QC, Canada) for library
272 preparation and sequencing. The integrity of all RNA was evaluated using a Bioanalyzer 2100
273 (Agilent; Mississauga, ON, Canada) and all samples had RNA Integrity Numbers (RIN) greater

274 than 7.6 (8.1 ± 0.3). Using 250ng of total RNA, mRNA was isolated using NEBNext® Poly(A)
275 Magnetic Isolation Module (New England Biolabs; Whitby, ON, Canada). Stranded cDNA
276 libraries [296 ± 1 base pair (bp) length] were created using the Illumina Stranded mRNA Prep
277 and sequencing was conducted on all 32 samples using 100 bp paired-end reads with a NovaSeq
278 6000 (Illumina; San Diego, CA, USA). Samples were sequenced across two batches with equal
279 representation from each group within each run. A mean of ~35,000,000 ± 4,000,000 paired-end
280 reads were produced per sample (Supp. Table 1). Preliminary analyses indicated that batch
281 effects were negligible (<1% of variation) and therefore batch was not included in statistical
282 models. Raw sequencing reads are archived with the National Center for Biotechnology
283 Information Sequence Read Archive (NCBI SRA Accession: PRJNA1139945).

284 Processing and analysis of the RNA-Seq data was performed by the Canadian Centre for
285 Computational Genomics (C3G; https://computationalgenomics.ca/) using their in-house RNA-
286 Seq pipeline (https://bitbucket.org/mugqic/genpipes/src/master/pipelines/rnaseq/). Briefly, paired
287 reads were joined and checked for quality using FastQC (v0.12.0, RRID:SCR_014583;
288 Babraham Bioinformatics) and low-quality reads (Phred score < 30; ~0.02% of all reads) were
289 trimmed using Trimmomatic [v0.39.0, RRID:SCR_011848; (Bolger et al., 2014)]. Filtered reads
290 from all libraries were aligned to the rainbow trout reference genome (USDA_OmykA_1.1;
291 ENSEMBL version 107; NCBI Accession: GCA_013265735.3) using STAR [v2.7.8a,
292 RRID:SCR_004463; (Dobin et al., 2013)]. This resulted in an average alignment rate of 86.3 ±
293 1.2 % across all samples which provided an average of 12,934 ± 78 transcripts per sample. A
294 total of 49,009 unique transcripts were identified overall. Picard (v3.0.0, RRID:SCR_006525;
295 Picard Tools) was used to create a single global BAM file for each sample and RNA expression
296 quantification was performed using HTSeq-count [v2.0.2, RRID:SCR_011867; (Anders et al.,

297 2015)]. Using the edgeR package [v3.40.2, RRID:SCR_012802; (Robinson et al., 2009)] in R
298 [v4.2.3, RRID:SCR_001905; (R Core Team, 2023)], genes were filtered for low expression (a
299 counts per million score of ≥ 3) which resulted in a final count of 25,647 unique transcripts.

300 **2.8. Statistical Analyses**

301 For all RNA-Seq analyses, each sample was normalized to its overall library size and
302 differential gene expression testing was performed in edgeR [v3.42.4, RRID:SCR_012802;
303 (Robinson et al., 2009)] using generalized linear models and F-tests. For the main RNA-Seq
304 analysis, the resulting p-values from these analyses were false-discovery rate corrected (FDR; p
305 < 0.01) using the Benjamini-Hochberg (BH) method within edgeR and an effect size of $\log_2$(fold
306 change) $>|0.5|$ between groups was utilized. However, we used a more liberal FDR threshold of p
307 < 0.05 without a fold change threshold when exploring changes in endocrine genes. Functional
308 enrichment analysis and subsequent data visualization was performed as described by Reimand
309 et al. (2019). Briefly, Gene Ontology (GO) terms were generated from gene lists via the g:GOSt
310 function within g:Profiler [RRID:SCR_006809; (Raudvere et al., 2019)]. GO terms were
311 considered as significantly enriched if they contained 4 or more differentially expressed genes
312 (DEGs) and had a BH-FDR value ≤ 0.1. To account for the identification of multiple GO terms
313 that all contained the same sets of DEGs, we created GO clusters using the EnrichmentMap
314 [v3.3.6, RRID:SCR_016052; (Merico et al., 2010)] and AutoAnnotate [v1.4.0;(Kucera et al.,
315 2016)] apps in Cytoscape [v3.10.0, RRID:SCR_003032; (Shannon et al., 2003)]. GO clusters
316 were annotated according to words that were most common across all GO terms within each
317 cluster. Enrichment maps were created using each list of significant GO terms and their
318 respective clusters. Additionally, to better characterize the extent of overlap between DEGs
319 across groups, we also created upset plots using the 'UpSetR' package (Conway et al., 2017) and

320 biplots depicting principal components 1 and 2—which were derived from a principal
321 components analysis using the 'prcomp' function—using the 'ggbiplot' package.

322 Statistical analysis of all plasma and qPCR data was performed using R [version 4.3; R
323 Core Team, 2023)]. All data are presented as means ± 1 standard error of the mean (SEM) and a
324 significance level (α) of 0.05 was used for all tests. Outliers were excluded based on a 2x
325 interquartile range threshold. When data did not meet the assumptions of normality and/or equal
326 variance, data were either log or square-root transformed to meet the assumptions, or analyses
327 were performed using ranked data. Plasma and qPCR data for Experiments 1 and 2 were
328 analyzed using two-way ANOVAs that included group (FW and SW or parr and smolt) and
329 either month (February, April or May) or time following SW exposure (FW, 24 h, 96 h or 240 h),
330 as well as the interaction between these factors. Data from Experiment 3 were analyzed using
331 one-way ANOVAs with time as a fixed factor. When significant differences were detected, post
332 hoc Tukey's tests were performed using the 'emmeans' package (Lenth, 2016).

333 **3. Results**

334 ***3.1 Experiment Series 1: Rainbow Trout***

335 ***3.1.1 Physiological effects of FW-to-SW transfer***

336 Plasma osmolality levels (Fig. 1A; $p_{group}<0.001$, $p_{time}=0.07$, $p_{group*time}=0.11$) were ~25%
337 higher in FW-to-SW transferred fish compared to FW-to-FW transferred fish across all
338 timepoints. In contrast, while plasma cortisol levels (Fig. 1B; $p_{group}<0.001$, $p_{time}=0.16$,
339 $p_{group*time}<0.001$) were low across all timepoints in FW-to-FW transferred fish, cortisol levels in
340 FW-to-SW transferred fish were 3- and 16-fold higher 24 and 72 h post-transfer, respectively.

341 ***3.1.2 Effects of FW-to-SW transfer on CNSS transcriptome***

342 After 24 h, we detected 324 DEGs (179 upregulated and 145 downregulated) when
343 comparing FW-to-SW and FW-to-FW transferred fish (Supp. File 1). Further scrutiny of these
344 DEGs using GO analysis revealed changes in clusters related to nuclear transport, membrane
345 transport, DNA maintenance, negative transcription regulation, neurotransmitter transport, lipid
346 biosynthesis, RAS protein signalling, and chromosome organization (Fig. 2; Supp. File 2). When
347 only DEGs that were higher in the FW-to-SW group were included in the GO analysis
348 neurotransmitter transport and stimuli responses differed (Fig. 2; Supp. File 2). In contrast,
349 membrane transport, chromosome organization, and lipid biosynthesis were affected when GO
350 analysis was performed using DEGs that were lower in the FW-to-SW group (Fig. 2; Supp. File
351 2).

352 After fish had acclimated for 168 h, we detected 193 DEGs (96 upregulated and 97
353 downregulated) between FW-to-SW and FW-to-FW transferred fish (Supp. File 1). GO analysis
354 revealed that these changes were primarily related to neuron development and differentiation,
355 cell responses to chemical stimulus, protein folding, and phospholipid metabolism (Fig. 3; Supp.
356 File 2). Specifically, upregulated DEGs were related to protein folding, while downregulated
357 DEGs were related to neuron development and differentiation (Fig. 3; Supp. File 2).

358 The greatest changes were observed when FW-to-SW transferred fish at 168 h versus 24
359 h were compared, which yielded 823 DEGs (425 upregulated and 398 downregulated; Supp. File
360 1). Accordingly, 17 unique DEG clusters were identified (Fig. 4; Supp. File 2), with several
361 focusing on the regulation of DNA and RNA processing (cellular catabolism regulation, RNA
362 catabolism, DNA organization and replication, RNA processing, and chromatin organization)
363 and cellular signalling and synapse regulation (synaptic signalling, negative signalling and
364 communication, and cell and synapse regulation). Additional GO clusters included:

365 developmental processes, cell and membrane adhesion, cell proliferation regulation, negative
366 cellular organization, amine metabolism, protein folding, cell projection organization, amino acid
367 metabolism, and cell cycle regulation. When only upregulated DEGs were considered (Fig. 4;
368 Supp. File 2), we again detected several GO clusters related to the regulation of DNA and RNA
369 processing (DNA organization and replication, RNA processing, protein-DNA organization,
370 DNA repair), as well as cell cycle regulation, negative biosynthesis regulation, cell projection
371 organization, cellular catabolism regulation, glycoprotein regulation, tissue development, cell-
372 cell adhesion, protein folding, amine metabolism, microtubule based movement, and amino acid
373 metabolism. When focusing on downregulated DEGs (Fig. 4; Supp. File 2) several clusters
374 related to synapses and cell proliferation (synapse signalling, cell proliferation, junction and
375 synapse organization, and neuron generation), as well as actin filament regulation, RNA
376 catabolism, negative cell signalling, substance and stimuli response, movement and responses,
377 cell and membrane adhesion, cellular export and secretion, and protein dephosphorylation were
378 identified. In contrast, we did not detect any significant DEGs when comparing the groups of
379 fish that had been sampled 1- or 7-days following transfer from FW-to-FW (Supp. File 1).

380 Of the combined 496 distinct DEGs identified between FW- and SW-transferred fish at
381 either 24 or 168 h post-transfer (Fig. 5), most DEGs (96%) were uniquely changed at either 24 h
382 (61%; 161 upregulated and 142 downregulated) or 168 h (35%; 77 upregulated and 95
383 downregulated). Only 18 DEGs (3.5%) were similarly affected at both timepoints (17
384 upregulated and 1 downregulated) and 3 DEGs (0.5%) showed opposing patterns between
385 timepoints (1 DEG upregulated at 24 h versus downregulated at 168 h and 2 DEGs
386 downregulated at 24 h versus upregulated at 168 h).

387 ***3.1.3 Presence of endocrine system components in the transcriptome of the CNSS***

388 In addition to detecting components of several peptide (e.g., AVP, CRF, enkephalin,
389 pituitary adenylate-cyclase-activating polypeptide, somatostatin, stanniocalcin, cholecystokinin,
390 neuropeptide Y, and galanin) and steroid (e.g., androgens, corticosteroids, and estrogens)
391 hormone systems that have previously been identified in the CNSS of other teleosts, we also
392 observed components of endocrine systems that have not previously been identified in the CNSS
393 (Table 2). Specifically, we identified components of hormone systems that are broadly involved
394 with calcium maintenance (calcitonin), cardiovascular regulation (natriuretic peptide and
395 tachykinin), growth/osmoregulation [insulin-like growth factor (IGF) and growth hormone], and
396 metabolism (leptin, nesfatin, and thyroid hormone).

397 Of the endocrine systems present in the CNSS, components of several were affected by
398 SW transfer (Table 2). After 24 h of SW acclimation, levels of AVP receptor 1Aa (*avpr1aa*;
399 +255% compared to FW transferred fish, p_{FDR}=0.007), insulin-like growth factor 2b (*igf2b*;
400 +111%, p_{FDR}=0.003), and glucocorticoid receptor 1 (*gr1*; -15%, p_{FDR}=0.03) were significantly
401 altered. A longer acclimatory period of 168 h in SW caused changes in levels of two paralogs of
402 insulin-like growth factor 1 (*igf1*; +217 and +235%, both p_{FDR}=0.04), CRFb2 (*crfb2*; -65%,
403 p_{FDR}=0.04), and thyroid hormone receptor beta (*thrb*; -22%, p_{FDR}=0.03). Finally, when
404 comparing fish that had acclimated to SW for 168 h versus 24 h, the abundance of two paralogs
405 of calcitonin beta (*calcb*; -28% and -38% compared to SW-transferred fish at 24 h, p_{FDR}=0.04
406 and p_{FDR}=0.007), calcitonin alpha (*calca*; -45%, p_{FDR}=0.01), glucocorticoid receptor 1 (*gr1*; -
407 30%, p_{FDR}=0.049), two paralogs of tachykinin 1 (*tac1*; -35% and -44%, p_{FDR}=0.01 and
408 p_{FDR}=0.03), and thyroid hormone receptor beta (*thrb*; -32%, p_{FDR}<0.001) were affected.

409 ***3.1.4 Effects of FW-to-SW transfer on CRF peptides in the CNSS***

410 In agreement with our RNA-Seq results (Table 2), qPCR assessment of CRF system
411 components in the CNSS of FW-acclimated trout (N=3) indicated that *uts1a*, *uts1b*, and *crfb1*
412 were highly abundant (all amplified at ~20 cycles; Supp. Fig. 1). Transcripts of *crfbp1* and *-2*,
413 *ucn2a* and *-b*, and *crfr1a* and *-1b* were 8x, 64x, and 1000x less abundant, respectively (with no
414 obvious differences between paralogs), while *crfa1* and *-a2*, *crfb2*, *crfr2a* and *2b*, and *ucn3* were
415 all >4000x less abundant (≥35 cycles). Therefore, we focused all subsequent qPCR analyses on
416 *crfb1*, *uts1a*, and *uts1b*.

417 Levels of *uts1a* (Fig. 6A; p_{group}=0.31, p_{time}=0.03, $p_{group*time}$<0.001), *uts1b* (Fig. 6B;
418 p_{group}=0.20, p_{time}=0.33, $p_{group*time}$=0.002), and *crfb1* (Fig. 6C; p_{group}=0.83, p_{time}=0.08,
419 $p_{group*time}$=0.003) all showed similar responses following SW transfer. After 24 h, transcript
420 levels were ~70-170% higher following transfer from FW-to-SW versus FW-to-FW, but levels
421 in FW-to-SW transferred fish declined by 72 h such that they were no longer different than levels
422 in FW-to-FW transferred fish.

423 ***3.2 Experiment Series 2: Atlantic Salmon***

424 While the following results are focused on transcriptional changes in the CNSS, a full
425 description of changes in plasma osmolality and cortisol levels in these fish has previously been
426 reported (Culbert et al., 2022; Culbert et al., In press). Briefly, plasma cortisol and osmolality
427 values were higher in smolts than parr across all sampling points and parr (but not smolts) had
428 elevated plasma cortisol and osmolality values 24 h after SW transfer. Following transfer from
429 SW-to-FW, plasma osmolality decreased within 24 h while all groups had low cortisol levels (≤
430 2 ng mL^{-1}).

431 ***3.2.1 Seasonal patterns in CRF peptides in the CNSS of parr and smolts***

432 Levels of *uts1a* (Fig. 7A; $p_{group}<0.001$, $p_{time}<0.001$, $p_{group*time}=0.57$), *uts1b* (Fig. 7B;
433 $p_{group}<0.001$, $p_{time}<0.001$, $p_{group*time}=0.74$), and *crfb1* (Fig. 7C; $p_{group}<0.001$, $p_{time}=0.001$,
434 $p_{group*time}=0.41$) were all ~3–4-fold higher in smolts than parr through the spring. Additionally,
435 levels increased through the spring in both groups with ~5-, ~3-, and ~2-fold increases in *uts1a*,
436 *uts1b*, and *crfb1*, respectively, when comparing between February and May.

437 ***3.2.2 Effects of FW-to-SW transfer on CRF peptides in the CNSS of parr and smolts***

438 Following transfer from FW-to-SW, levels of *uts1a* (Fig. 8A; $p_{group}<0.001$, $p_{time}<0.001$,
439 $p_{group*time}=0.15$), *uts1b* (Fig. 8B; $p_{group}<0.001$, $p_{time}<0.001$, $p_{group*time}=0.69$), and *crfb1* (Fig. 8C;
440 $p_{group}<0.001$, $p_{time}<0.001$, $p_{group*time}=0.34$) decreased by ~50–65% within 96 h in both parr and
441 smolts. However, levels of all peptides remained ~6–7-fold higher in smolts versus parr across
442 all timepoints.

443 ***3.2.3 Effects of SW-to-FW transfer on CRF peptides in the CNSS of post-smolts***

444 Levels of *uts1a* (Fig. 9A; p=0.17) and *uts1b* (Fig. 9B; p=0.17) did not change following
445 transfer from FW-to-SW, but levels of *crfb1* (Fig 9C; p=0.007) were ~50% lower 24 h post-
446 transfer compared to fish that were chronically acclimated to either FW or SW.

447 **4. Discussion**

448 While the CNSS has long been hypothesized to serve osmoregulatory roles, our
449 understanding of these roles is limited in part because no study has characterized transcriptome-
450 wide responses by the CNSS following changes in environmental salinity. In the current study,
451 we determined how the transcriptome of the CNSS in rainbow trout—a euryhaline salmonid—
452 changed 24 and 168 h following transfer from FW-to-SW. Plasma osmolality levels were
453 elevated in SW fish at all timepoints—indicating that SW-transferred fish were physiologically
454 perturbed at both timepoints—but plasma cortisol levels had returned to baseline by 168 h,
455 suggesting that fish were beginning to acclimate by this time. Indeed, transcriptional changes in
456 the CNSS at 24 versus 168 h post-transfer support temporal differences in physiological
457 responses following SW transfer. Only 18 DEGs showed conserved responses across both
458 timepoints, and the number of DEGs was far greater when comparing SW-transferred fish at 24
459 and 168 h (823 DEGs) versus FW- and SW-transferred fish within either timepoint (24 h: 324
460 DEGs; 168 h: 193 DEGs).

461 Many of the responses observed 24 h after transfer to SW reflected broad changes in
462 transcriptional processes, including changes in transcription factor signalling (GO cluster:
463 negative transcription regulation), histone regulation (GO cluster: DNA maintenance), and DNA
464 modification (GO cluster: chromosome organization). The only other transcriptomics study
465 which has investigated the CNSS reported similar changes in transcription-related processes in
466 the CNSS of flounder following acute increases in temperature (Yuan et al., 2021), suggesting
467 that this may be a general response of the CNSS following exposure to environmental stressors.
468 Our results are also consistent with transcriptional responses observed in other tissues following
469 SW transfer of salmonids. For example, previous work in Arctic charr (*Salvelinus alpinus*)

470 reported that genes related to transcriptional processes (especially methylation) were upregulated
471 in the gills 240 h after fish had been transferred from FW-to-SW (Norman et al., 2014).
472 Similarly, Harvey et al. (Harvey et al., 2024) found that transcription factor dynamics and
473 chromatin remodeling in the liver of Atlantic salmon changed both during smoltification and
474 following SW transfer. Thus, widespread adjustments in transcriptional processes are clearly an
475 important response while acclimating to SW, as well as responding to stressors more generally.

476 We also observed several changes in genes related to amino acid transport (GO cluster:
477 membrane transport) and lipid metabolism (GO cluster: lipid biosynthesis) at 24 h, which likely
478 reflects metabolic adjustments associated with SW acclimation. Changes in lipid metabolism—
479 specifically, increased rates of lipolysis and reduced lipogenesis—are one of the primary
480 metabolic changes that occur during smoltification and SW transfer (Gillard et al., 2018; Harvey
481 et al., 2024; Sheridan, 1989), and these periods are also associated with less pronounced changes
482 in amino acid metabolism (Harvey et al., 2024; Sweeting et al., 1985).

483 Lastly, we detected an upregulation of DEGs related to neurotransmitter transport 24 h
484 after SW transfer, which was primarily related to increased levels of genes that regulate GABA
485 and taurine transport [*slc6a11*, *slc6a6a*, and *slc6a6b*; (Verri et al., 2012)]. While firing rates of
486 Dahlgren cells are regulated by many hormones and neurotransmitters, GABA appears to be one
487 of the major suppressors of Dahlgren cell activity (Lan et al., 2021). Indeed, Yuan et al. (Yuan et
488 al., 2020b) reported that reductions in firing activity of Dahlgren cells in the CNSS of flounder in
489 response to low temperature is primarily mediated by increased GABA signalling. Thus, it is
490 likely that GABA signalling is important for regulating Dahlgren cells activity 24 h post-transfer
491 to SW, but future studies should evaluate changes in other components of GABA signalling
492 pathways (i.e., receptor abundance) to better understand how GABA is affecting the CNSS

493 following SW-transfer. Additionally, increased taurine transport into the CNSS may be an
494 important response following SW transfer since taurine can aid in the maintenance of cellular
495 osmolality and help to minimize oxidative damage (Cheng et al., 2018; Lambert et al., 2015;
496 Schaffer et al., 2000; Thirupathi et al., 2020).

497 Fewer changes between FW-to-FW and FW-to-SW transferred fish were detected at 168
498 h post-transfer, with the most notable changes being an upregulation of genes related to protein
499 folding and a downregulation of genes involved in neuron development and differentiation.
500 While upregulation of genes related to protein folding and cellular stress (*calr*, *hsp90b1a*,
501 *dnajb11*, and *hspa5*) likely indicates that SW-transferred trout may still have been acclimating to
502 their new environment even after 168 h, it is less obvious why genes related to neuron
503 development and differentiation might have changed. It is possible that these changes reflect
504 adjustments in the neurosecretory activity of the CNSS (i.e., alterations in Dahlgren cell
505 abundance) since previous work investigating effects of temperature changes on the CNSS of
506 flounder also reported that cellular proliferation was reduced in response to either elevated or
507 reduced temperatures (Yuan et al., 2020a). However, these authors did not observe any changes
508 specifically in populations of Dahlgren cells, suggesting that changes in genes related to neuronal
509 processes detected in the current study are also unlikely to reflect changes in Dahlgren cell
510 abundance. Instead, these changes could reflect reductions in the growth of neurites (progenitors
511 of axons and dendrites) since multiple DEGs in this GO cluster (*slitrk5* and 2 paralogs of *nptna*)
512 are involved in modulating neurite outgrowth and activity (Beesley et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2022);
513 but additional studies are needed to determine what the functional outcome(s) of such changes
514 might be.

515 Endocrine functions have been associated with the CNSS for 60+ years, yet the suite of
516 hormone systems that are present in the CNSS and/or regulate the CNSS remains unclear. Here,
517 we confirmed the presence of components of many endocrine systems which have previously
518 been identified in the CNSS (e.g., AVP, corticosteroids, CRF, and somatostatin; see Table 2), as
519 well as several hormone systems that have not previously been identified in the CNSS (e.g.,
520 calcitonin, growth hormone, IGF, and leptin; see Table 2). Interestingly, despite high abundance
521 of PtHrP components in the CNSS of flounder (Ingleton et al., 2002; Lu et al., 2017), all
522 components of the PTH/PTHrP system that were identified in our RNA-Seq data were very low
523 in abundance (i.e., below the abundance threshold for inclusion in our final gene list). Thus, it is
524 likely that the complement of endocrine systems which are present in the CNSS varies across
525 species and additional work utilizing a diverse range of species is clearly warranted to better
526 establish similarities and differences across teleosts.

527 In addition to being present in the CNSS, components of several hormone systems in the
528 CNSS were affected by SW transfer. While some of these changes occurred in endocrine system
529 which have previously been identified in the CNSS and have conserved osmoregulatory
530 functions [e.g., AVP, corticosteroids, and CRF; (Cannell et al., 2016; Kulczykowska, 2006;
531 Stengel and Taché, 2009; Takei et al., 2014)], we also detected changes in several hormone
532 systems (e.g., calcitonin, IGF, tachykinin, and thyroid hormone systems) which we do not
533 believe have previously been identified in the CNSS of any fish (Rousseau et al., 2024). Of these
534 novel endocrine systems, changes in calcitonin and IGF systems are particularly interesting since
535 both hormone families have osmoregulatory functions. Calcitonin is involved in calcium
536 regulation (Takei and Hwang, 2016), and calcitonin levels are often acutely elevated following
537 SW transfer (Björnsson et al., 1987; Fouchereau-Peron et al., 1986; Lafont et al., 2006; Najib

538 and Martine, 1996). Indeed, we found that transcript abundance of several calcitonin peptides
539 was higher in SW-transferred fish at 24 h versus 168 h post-transfer. Interestingly, Björnsson et
540 al. (Björnsson et al., 1987) reported that cortisol reduces circulating calcitonin levels in coho
541 salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*). While cortisol levels were 3x higher in SW- versus FW-
542 transferred fish at 24 h, levels of the most abundant paralog of glucocorticoid receptor 1 were
543 15% lower in SW-transferred fish at this time. Therefore, the observed elevation in calcitonin
544 transcript abundance 24 h post-transfer may be mediated, at least in part, by local reductions in
545 glucocorticoid receptor activity within the CNSS. Like calcitonin, the osmoregulatory actions of
546 IGF-1 (i.e., increased ion secretion and improved SW tolerance) are well established (Mancera
547 and McCormick, 2007; McCormick, 2012); however, far fewer studies have evaluated
548 osmoregulatory functions of IGF-2. In Atlantic salmon and black-chinned tilapia (*Sarotherodon*
549 *melanotheron*), transfer from FW-to-SW caused transcript levels of both *igf1* and *igf2* to increase
550 in the gills (Breves et al., 2017; Link et al., 2010), but levels of these transcripts were reduced in
551 the brain and liver of tilapia following SW transfer (Link et al., 2022, 2010) suggesting tissue-
552 specific regulation. The current data indicate that transcription of both IGF-1 and IGF-2 is
553 stimulated in the CNSS following SW transfer, but the temporal dynamics of these changes vary.
554 While IGF-2 was upregulated during early acclimation (after 24 h in SW), IGF-1 upregulation
555 didn't occur until later (after 168 h in SW). In contrast to calcitonin and IGF, there is limited
556 evidence for direct osmoregulatory roles of thyroid hormones in salmonids (McCormick, 2001).
557 Similarly, while tachykinin has many physiological functions (Severini et al., 2002), there is
558 little support for an osmoregulatory role of this hormone family. Therefore, it is unlikely that the
559 observed changes in either thyroid hormone or tachykinin systems are directly associated with
560 osmoregulatory processes. Overall, these data extend our understanding of the importance of

561 endocrine signalling in the CNSS, but additional work is necessary to determine whether these
562 hormones (e.g., IGF and calcitonin) are released into circulation via the urophysis to exert
563 physiological effects on other tissues, or whether the actions of these hormone systems are
564 locally restricted to within the CNSS.

565 While few significant changes within the CRF system were detected during our RNA-Seq
566 analysis—levels of *crfb2* were 65% lower in SW-to-FW versus FW-to-FW transferred fish at
567 168 h—we decided to further characterize transcriptional changes in the CRF system of the
568 CNSS using qPCR because CRF peptides were highly abundant in the CNSS and their synthesis
569 has previously been shown to respond to changes in environmental salinity (Craig et al., 2005;
570 Lu et al., 2004). Using this more direct approach, we found that transcript levels of the three
571 major CRF peptide paralogs in the CNSS (*uts1a*, *uts1b*, and *crfb1*) were all 70–170% higher in
572 SW-to-FW versus FW-to-FW transferred rainbow trout at 24 h post-transfer (similar, non-
573 significant responses were also observed in the RNA-Seq analysis). These findings agree with
574 previous studies which have generally shown that transfer of FW fish to SW or marine fish to
575 FW causes acute (≤ 24h post-transfer) changes in protein/mRNA levels of CRF and/or UTS1
576 (Larson and Madani, 1991; Lu et al., 2019; Minniti et al., 1989), including in rainbow trout
577 (Craig et al., 2005; Larson and Madani, 1996). Interestingly, Craig et al. (Craig et al., 2005)
578 reported that transferring rainbow trout from FW-to-SW caused elevated levels of *crfb* and *uts1*
579 in the CNSS 24, 72, and 168 h post-transfer. It is unclear why our results differ from Craig et al.
580 (Craig et al., 2005), but since body size is positively associated with SW tolerance in many
581 salmonids (McCormick and Naiman, 1984; Parry, 1958), this difference may reflect the size of
582 fish used in our study (~550g) versus Craig et al. (~185g). Regardless, because CRF peptides
583 generally promote ion excretion across osmoregulatory epithelia in fish (Chan, 1975; Mainoya

584 and Bern, 1982; Marshall and Bern, 1981), acute activation of CRF peptide transcription
585 following SW transfer likely helps fish develop the appropriate mechanisms needed to minimize
586 the passive influx of ions and promote salt secretion—which is necessary for survival in
587 hyperosmotic environments (Larsen et al., 2014).

588 In contrast to our rainbow trout results, transcript abundance of CRF peptides decreased
589 when Atlantic salmon parr or smolts were transferred from FW-to-SW. However, this likely
590 reflects prior anticipatory increases in the abundance of CRF peptides which were observed
591 during the spring in both parr and smolts—although, seasonal upregulations were much stronger
592 in smolts than parr—prior to when SW migrations would normally occur. In advance of SW
593 migrations, smolts undergo a variety of physiological adjustments during the spring, including
594 many changes related to osmoregulation, which prepare them to migrate from FW into SW
595 (McCormick, 2012). Based on the current results, it appears that increased activity of the CRF
596 system in the CNSS may be involved in regulating these preparatory changes. Indeed, previous
597 work reported that the cytophysiological activity of the neurosecretory neurons in the CNSS was
598 higher in smolts than parr in coho salmon (Nishioka et al., 1982). Furthermore, Nishioka et al.
599 (Nishioka et al., 1982) also reported that activity in the CNSS of SW-acclimated coho smolts (6-
600 8 months post-transfer) remained higher than FW-acclimated parr, which is consistent with the
601 sustained elevation of CRF peptide transcript levels in smolts even 240 h after SW transfer
602 compared to FW-acclimated parr. While a central role for CRF peptides in the brain have
603 previously been reported in preparation of seasonal migrations in salmonids (Clements et al.,
604 2002; Culbert et al., 2022; McCormick et al., 2019; Ojima and Iwata, 2010; Westring et al.,
605 2008), we believe that the current data are the first report of seasonal changes in the CNSS CRF
606 system of salmonids. Finally, in agreement with the apparent activation of CRF peptide

607 transcription in the CNSS either in response to (rainbow trout) or in advance of (Atlantic salmon)
608 exposure to increased salinity, we also found that levels of *crfb1* transiently decreased 24 h after
609 transfer of SW-acclimated Atlantic salmon into FW. Thus, our data suggest that CRF peptide
610 transcription acutely increases in response to hyperosmotic environments and acutely decreases
611 in response to hypoosmotic environments in salmonids.

612 Overall, transcriptional responses of the CNSS following transfer from FW-to-SW are
613 temporally dynamic and are associated with changes in several endocrine systems. Additionally,
614 elevated production of CRF peptides by the CNSS, either in response to or in advance of
615 increased environmental salinity, appears to be a conserved response across salmonid fishes.
616 Collectively, these results provide the most intensive investigation of the osmoregulatory
617 functions of the CNSS at a molecular level conducted to date and offer several promising
618 avenues for future studies to evaluate novel physiological contributions of the CNSS.

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CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Brett M. Culbert: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Stephen D. McCormick**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing. **Nicholas J. Bernier**: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be made available following publication.

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1050 **Table 1.** Gene specific primers used for real-time polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) in rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) or Atlantic
1051 Salmon (*Salmo salar*). Note that the sequences of *ucn3a* and *ucn3b* are 99% identical in both species and we were therefore unable to
1052 design primers that differentially amplified these paralogs.

	Primer Sequence (5' to 3')	Amplicon Size (bp)	Efficiency (%)	Accession Number	Reference
Trout					
crfa1	F: CAAAATTCGCTCCAGTCCTC R: TGCGTGAGCTGAAGTTGTAA	95	100	XM_021613200	Current Study
crfa2	F: ATTCGCCCCAATCTTCATT R: TGAAGTAAAGCCCTGTTGACC	79	102	XM_021589550	Current Study
crfb1	F: CTGAAGGCATGTACCCAGAG R: GACGAACCGGCTGATGTT	110	102	NM_001124286	Current Study
crfb2	F: GAAAGTCATGCACCCCAAG R: AAGCCGCTGATGAACCTATT	117	102	NM_001124627	Current Study
crfbp1	F: CCAACACGTTGTCTATCTAC R: TTTTATGGCAACCTTCAGGCT	107	100	NM_001124631	Current Study
crfbp2	F: CTCCCTATCTATCTCTCCAC R: GTTATGGCGATCCTCAGGAT	122	100	XM_036977080	Current Study
crfr1a	F: TCCCTCGGAGACAGGAGTGT R: CTTTTACGATGTGCGACTGGT	121	102	XM_021557506	Current Study
crfr1b	F: CGGCAATTTATAGGCTGTGTT R: CCCACATGAACAACCAACAG	114	99	XM_021624572	Current Study
crfr2a	F: CACTGTACTGTACTAGTGGT R: TCCTGCTTAAATGATCTCTGC	83	100	XM_021613636	Current Study
crfr2b	F: TAAATTCAGAACAGATGGGC R: CATTGCCAGTAAGACTCTGAC	82	100	XM_021589160	Current Study
ucn2a	F: CATGCGTATGTGTCTGAGCC R: TCTTCTCCCATCCTTTGGCAC	61	101	CDQ61544	Current Study
ucn2b	F: ACTCCTAAGTTGTGACATTGGA R: CCAGACACAGGCTTAGATG	68	99	XM_021570508	Current Study
ucn3a/b	F: GCACGGAACTTGGACATCAT R: GTCTGAGACAGAGGCTGGAG	91	100	XM_021596023 XM_036945073	Current Study
uts1a	F: GTTGCTGAAGGCTGGTGATA	82	100	NM_001124343	Current Study

	R: CAACCGGGGATTTCTTTG				
uts1b	F: GGCGACGCAGTTTCCTAC	60	99	XM_021612039	Current Study
	R: GGGATTTCTCTGCAAATAACG				
ef1a	F: CCATTGACATTTCTCTGTGGAAGT	106	96	AF498320	Madison et al., 2015
	R: GAGGTACCAGTGATCATGTTCTTGA				
rpl13a	F: GGACAAGCTGCACTGGAGAG	113	93	XM_021574753	Culbert et al., In press
	R: GTGGGCTTCAGACGGACAAT				
Salmon					
crfb1	F: CTTGATCCATCACTCGTGGAAA	98	108	XM_014181363	Culbert et al., 2022
	R: GTCAGGGGTTCAACGAGATC				
uts1a	F: CAGTGTCTGTAGACCACGG	89	104	XM_014205273	Culbert et al., 2022
	R: TATCACCAGCCTTCAGCAAC				
uts1b	F: GCAGTCTACTACAATCGCCAT	103	101	XM_014144548	Culbert et al., 2022
	R: AAACGGTGCCTTGATCGC				
ef1a	F: TCCTGCGGAGTCTCAAAACC	96	103	XM_014141923	Culbert et al., 2022
	R: CGTTGGGTTCTTTTCCTGCG				
rpl13a	F: GGACAAGCTGCACTGGAGAG	113	93	XM_014128281	Culbert et al., In press
	R: GTGGGCTTCAGACGGACAAT				

1053 *crf*, corticotropin-releasing factor; *crfbp*, corticotropin-releasing factor binding protein; *crfr*, corticotropin-releasing factor receptor;
1054 *ef1a*, elongation factor 1 alpha; *rpl13a*, ribosomal protein L13a; *ucn*, urocortin, *uts*, urotensin.

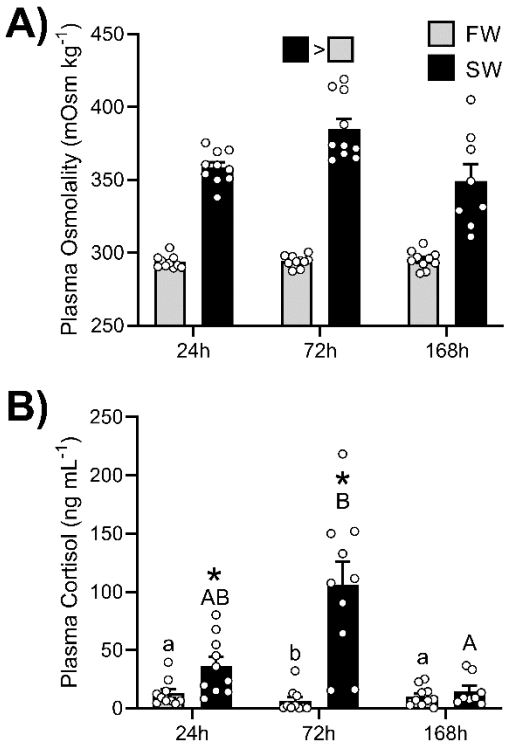
1055 **Table 2.** Endocrine-related genes (ligands and receptors) detected in the CNSS of rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*). The relative
1056 abundance of each gene is reported as the abundance ranking out of all 25,647 genes detected in the CNSS of rainbow trout in FW
1057 (threshold of ≥3 counts per million total reads). Example references are provided in instances where components of each hormone
1058 system have previously been identified in the CNSS of a teleost. Genes names are as listed on ENSEMBL except for components of
1059 the corticotropin-releasing factor, corticosteroid, and growth hormone systems which were manually annotated in agreement with
1060 previous studies of salmonid-specific paralogs for these systems (Mennigen et al., 2022; Romero et al., 2020; Culbert et al., In press).
1061 Significant differences ($p_{FDR} < 0.05$) are indicated using the following symbols: † = Higher in SW versus FW at 24 h; ‡ = Lower in SW
1062 versus FW at 24 h; § = Higher in SW versus FW at 168 h; ¶ = Lower in SW versus FW at 168 h; ⁋ = Higher at 24 h versus 168 h in SW.

Hormone System	ENSEMBL ID	Gene Name	Symbol	Abundance Rank	Example References
Arginine Vasopressin (AVP)	ENSOMYG00000020106	AVP receptor 1Aa†	*avpr1a*	11,634	1,2
	ENSOMYG00000031005	AVP	*avp*	20,640	
Androgen/Estrogen	ENSOMYG00000031569	Estrogen receptor β2	*erb2*	15,119	3
	ENSOMYG00000019366	Estrogen receptor 1	*esr1*	20,974	
	ENSOMYG00000013733	Androgen receptor β	*arb*	23,168	
	ENSOMYG00000011232	Estrogen receptor 2a	*esr2a*	25,097	
Calcitonin	ENSOMYG00000037910	Calcitonin-related polypeptide β⁋	*calcb*	2,611	
	ENSOMYG00000028443	Calcitonin-related polypeptide α	*calca*	2,881	
	ENSOMYG00000038284	Calcitonin-related polypeptide α⁋	*calca*	3,488	
	ENSOMYG00000033548	Calcitonin-related polypeptide β⁋	*calcb*	4,659	
	ENSOMYG00000027416	Calcitonin receptor-like a	*calcrla*	13,480	
	ENSOMYG00000047298	Calcitonin receptor-like a	*calcrla*	21,173	
Corticosteroid	ENSOMYG00000031572	Glucocorticoid receptor 1‡	*gr1*	3,217	4,5
	ENSOMYG00000022763	Glucocorticoid receptor 2	*gr2*	10,260	
	ENSOMYG00000042542	Glucocorticoid receptor 2	*gr2*	18,282	
	ENSOMYG00000014588	Glucocorticoid receptor 1⁋	*gr1*	18,654	
	ENSOMYG00000012882	Mineralocorticoid receptor a	*mra*	19,894	
	ENSOMYG00000010574	Mineralocorticoid receptor b	*mrb*	20,741	

Corticotropin-Releasing Factor (CRF)	ENSOMYG00000051449	Urotensin 1a	*uts1a*	25	6,7,8,9
	ENSOMYG00000018606	Urotensin 1b	*uts1b*	33	
	ENSOMYG00000004052	CRFb1	*crfb1*	53	
	ENSOMYG00000044159	Urocortin 2b	*ucn2b*	17,053	
	ENSOMYG00000036163	CRFb2[¶]	*crfb2*	20,334	
Enkephalin	ENSOMYG00000007450	Proenkephalin b	*penkb*	1,933	10
	ENSOMYG00000024686	Proenkephalin a	*penka*	15,673	
Growth Hormone (GH)	ENSOMYG00000034417	GH receptor b1	*ghrb1*	4,287	
	ENSOMYG00000047593	GH receptor b2	*ghrb2*	8,258	
	ENSOMYG00000037342	GH-releasing hormone receptor b	*ghrhrb*	22,303	
Insulin-Like Growth Factor (IGF)	ENSOMYG00000047099	IGF2 receptor	*igf2r*	1,985	
	ENSOMYG00000009988	IGF2 receptor	*igf2r*	4,628	
	ENSOMYG00000012223	IGF2b[†]	*igf2b*	11,294	
	ENSOMYG00000025784	IGF-like family receptor 1	*igflr1*	13,431	
	ENSOMYG00000038605	IGF1[§]	*igf1*	19,390	
	ENSOMYG00000013731	IGF receptor 1a	*igfr1a*	20,898	
	ENSOMYG00000023593	IGF1[§]	*igf1*	21,104	
	ENSOMYG00000028616	IGF receptor 1a	*igfr1a*	23,175	
	ENSOMYG00000066583	IGF 1b receptor	*igf1rb*	24,682	
Leptin	ENSOMYG00000007753	Leptin receptor	*lepr*	15,667	
	ENSOMYG00000000549	Leptin receptor	*lepr*	19,179	
Natriuretic Peptide	ENSOMYG00000047680	Natriuretic peptide receptor 2	*npr2*	14,619	
	ENSOMYG00000011071	Natriuretic peptide receptor 1a	*npr1a*	15,147	
	ENSOMYG00000040077	Natriuretic peptide receptor 2	*npr2*	19,345	
Nesfatin	ENSOMYG00000014020	Nucleobindin 1	*nucb1*	3,775	
	ENSOMYG00000037688	Nucleobindin 2a	*nucb2a*	4,516	
	ENSOMYG00000029455	Nucleobindin 2	*nucb2*	5,532	

	ENSOMYG00000012646	Nucleobindin 1	*nucb1*	6,090	
Pituitary Adenylate-Cyclase-Activating Polypeptide (PACAP)	ENSOMYG00000017026	ACAP1	*adcyap1a*	2,385	11
	ENSOMYG00000037446	ACAP1a receptor 1	*adcyap1r1a*	13,333	
Somatostatin	ENSOMYG00000013058	Urotensin 2a	*uts2a*	12	12,13,14,15
	ENSOMYG00000046142	Urotensin 2a	*uts2a*	39	
	ENSOMYG00000029539	Urotensin 2b	*uts2b*	2,159	
	ENSOMYG00000069067	Urotensin-related peptide 1	*urp1*	2,561	
	ENSOMYG00000036798	Somatostatin 1	*sst1.1*	19,140	
Tachykinin	ENSOMYG00000031155	Tachykinin precursor 1[¶]	*tac1*	3,951	
	ENSOMYG00000012700	Tachykinin precursor 1[¶]	*tac1*	10,421	
Thyroid Hormone	ENSOMYG00000063156	Thyroid hormone receptor β[¶]	*thrb*	2,110	
	ENSOMYG00000004119	Thyroid hormone receptor β	*thrb*	4,384	
Additional Hormone Systems	ENSOMYG00000067176	Stanniocalcin 2	*stc2a*	17,241	16
	ENSOMYG00000025264	Cholecystokinin a	*ccka*	23,282	5
	ENSOMYG00000001366	Neuropeptide Y	*npy*	24,778	17,5
	ENSOMYG00000001126	Galanin Receptor 1	*galr1*	25,459	18

[1](Lacanilao, 1972) [2](Gozdowska et al., 2013) [3](Callard et al., 1988) [4](Lu et al., 2007) [5](Rupia et al., 2023) [6](Lederis et al., 1982) [7](Lu et al., 2004) [8](Craig et al., 2005) [9](Alderman and Bernier, 2009) [10](Yamada et al., 1988) [11](Jiang et al., 2023) [12](Pearson et al., 1980) [13](Larson and Madani, 1991) [14](Lu et al., 2006) [15](Quan et al., 2015) [16](Greenwood et al., 2009) [17](Oka et al., 1997) [18](Cornbrooks and Parsons, 1991)



1067

1068 Figure 1. Changes in (A) plasma osmolality and (B) cortisol values of rainbow trout
1069 (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) that were transferred from freshwater-to-freshwater (FW; grey) or from
1070 freshwater-to-seawater (SW; black) for 24, 72, or 168h. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are
1071 depicted using either letters (across time; uppercase = within SW, lowercase = within FW), filled
1072 oversized squares (between groups across all timepoints) or asterisks (between groups within a
1073 timepoint). Values are represented as means ± SEM and individual data points are shown.

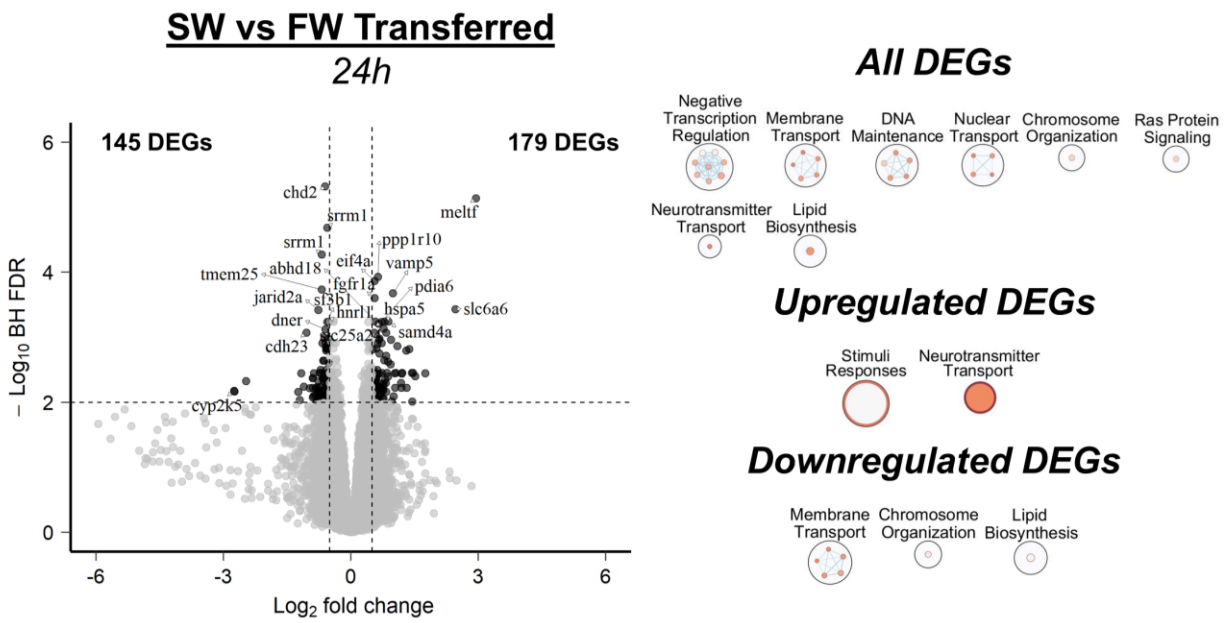


Figure 2. Effect of transferring rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) from freshwater-to-freshwater (FW) or from freshwater-to-seawater (SW) for 24h as determined via RNA-Seq. Data are presented as changes in SW relative to FW. Differentially expressed genes (DEGs) with a Log_2 fold change ≥ |0.5| between groups and were significantly different following Benjamini-Hochberg false-discovery rate (BH-FDR) correction ($p < 0.01$) are darkened on the volcano plot and a subset of genes are labelled (see Supplemental File 1 for more details). Note that for visualization purposes the x- and y- axes of the volcano plot are plotted on a Log_2 and Log_{10} scale, respectively. Significant GO terms were clustered (larger circles) based on overlap between shared genes when analyzing all significant genes, only significant upregulated genes, or only significant downregulated genes. Each smaller circle within the larger circles represents an individual GO term (see Supplemental File 2 for more details). The extent of overlapping genes shared between GO terms is indicated by the intensity of the connecting lines (darker = more shared genes) and significance of each GO term is indicated by the colour of the circle (darker = more significant).

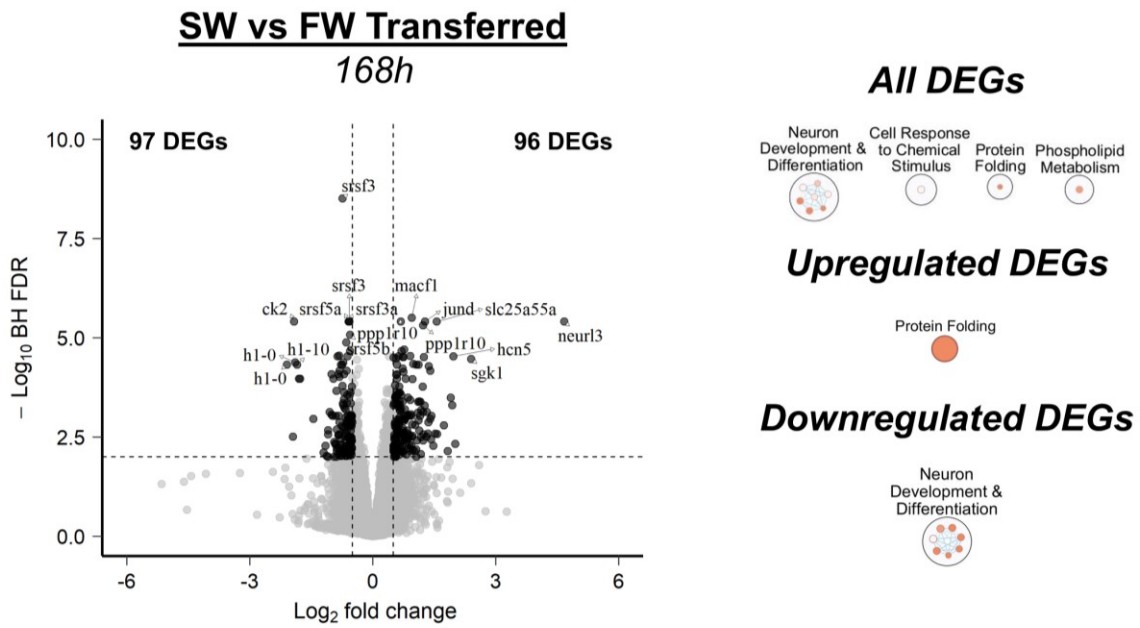


Figure 3. Effect of transferring rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) from freshwater-to-freshwater (FW) or from freshwater-to-seawater (SW) for 168h as determined via RNA-Seq. Data are presented as changes in SW relative to FW. Differentially expressed genes (DEGs) with a Log_2 fold change ≥ |0.5| between groups and were significantly different following Benjamini-Hochberg false-discovery rate (BH-FDR) correction ($p < 0.01$) are darkened on the volcano plot and a subset of genes are labelled (see Supplemental File 1 for more details). Note that for visualization purposes the x- and y- axes of the volcano plot are plotted on a Log_2 and Log_{10} scale, respectively. Significant GO terms were clustered (larger circles) based on overlap between shared genes when analyzing all significant genes, only significant upregulated genes, or only significant downregulated genes. Each smaller circle within the larger circles represents an individual GO term (see Supplemental File 2 for more details). The extent of overlapping genes shared between GO terms is indicated by the intensity of the connecting lines (darker = more shared genes) and significance of each GO term is indicated by the colour of the circle (darker = more significant).

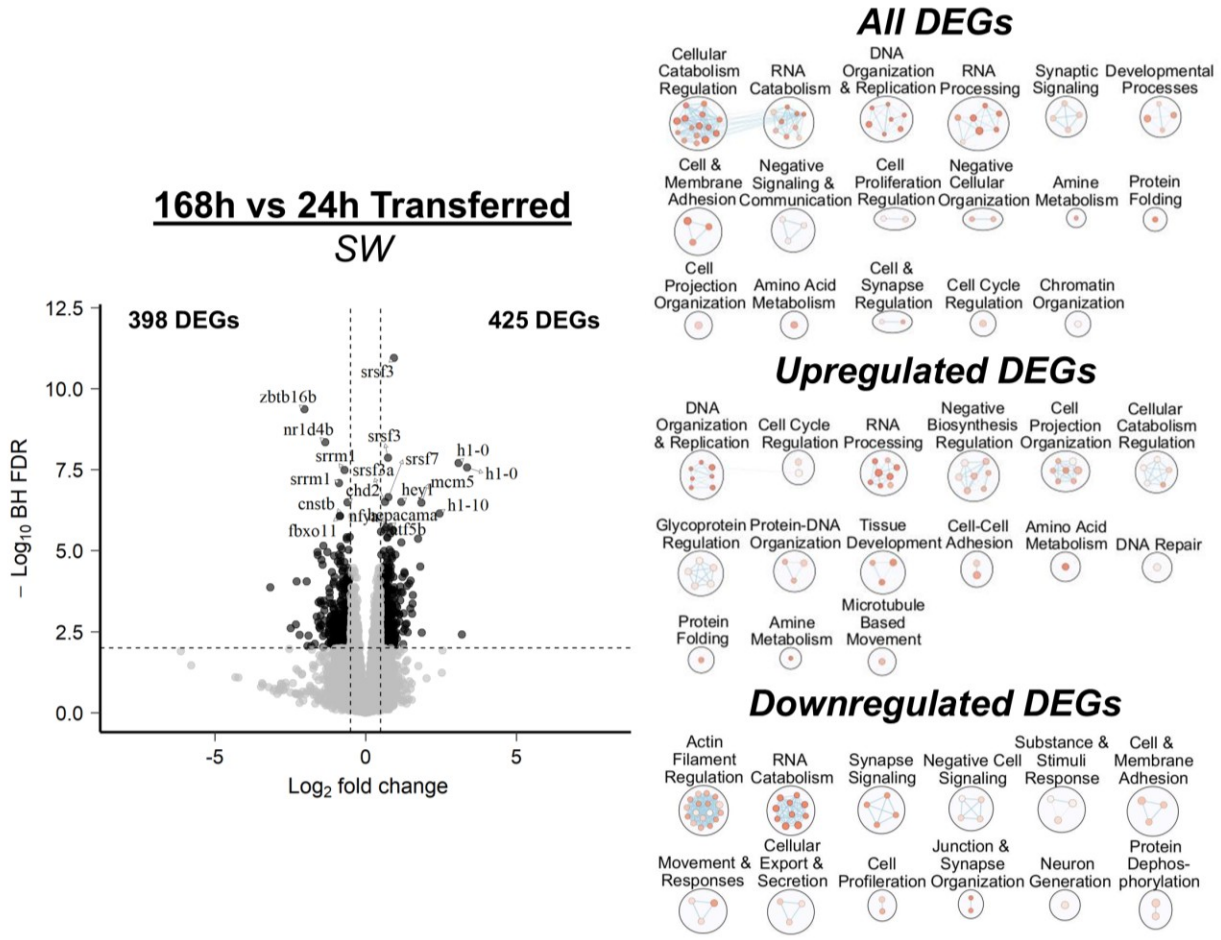


Figure 4. Effect of transferring rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) from freshwater-to-seawater (SW) for 24h versus 168h as determined via RNA-Seq. Data are presented as changes at 168h relative to 24h. Differentially expressed genes (DEGs) with a Log_2 fold change ≥ |0.5| between groups and were significantly different following Benjamini-Hochberg false-discovery rate (BH-FDR) correction ($p < 0.01$) are darkened on the volcano plot and a subset of genes are labelled (see Supplemental File 1 for more details). Note that for visualization purposes the x- and y- axes of the volcano plot are plotted on a Log_2 and Log_{10} scale, respectively. Significant GO terms were clustered (larger circles) based on overlap between shared genes when analyzing all significant genes, only significant upregulated genes, or only significant downregulated genes. Each smaller circle within the larger circles represents an individual GO term (see Supplemental File 2 for more details). The extent of overlapping genes shared between GO terms is indicated by the intensity of the connecting lines (darker = more shared genes) and significance of each GO term is indicated by the colour of the circle (darker = more significant).

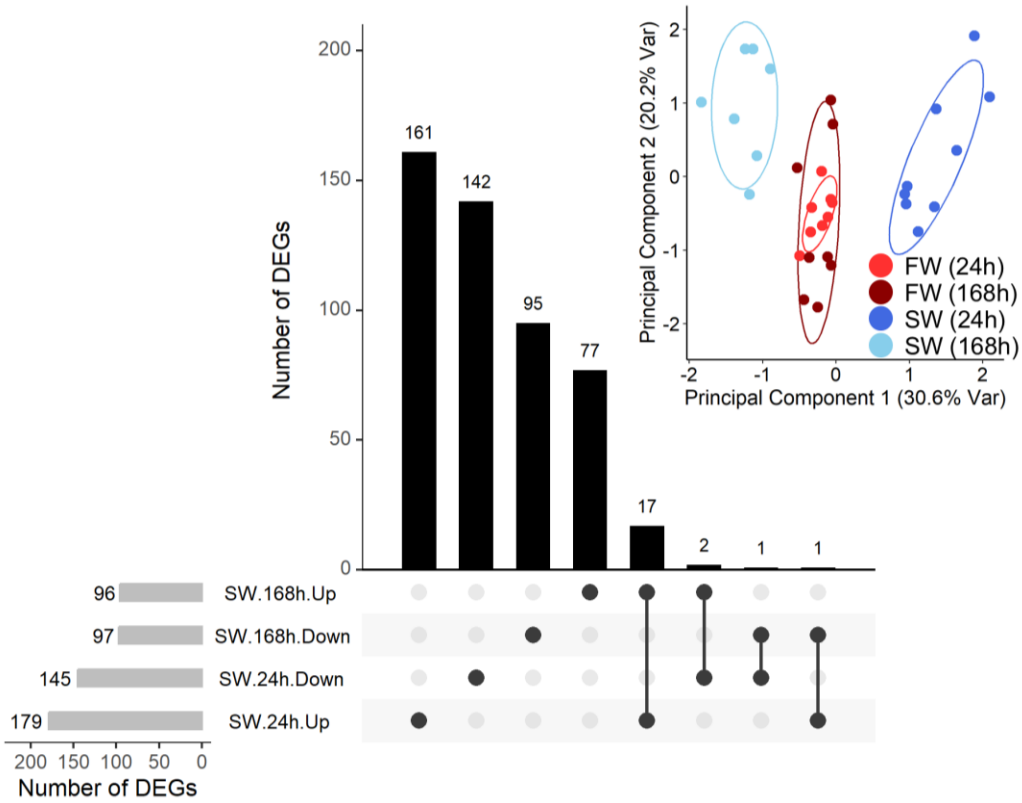


Figure 5. Upset plot depicting overlap between genes that were significantly different in rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) that were transferred from freshwater-to-seawater (SW) compared to fish that were transferred from freshwater-to-freshwater (FW) for either 24 or 168 h. A biplot depicting overlap between principal components 1 and 2 based on a principal component analysis that included all significant differentially expressed genes (DEGs) is included as an inset.

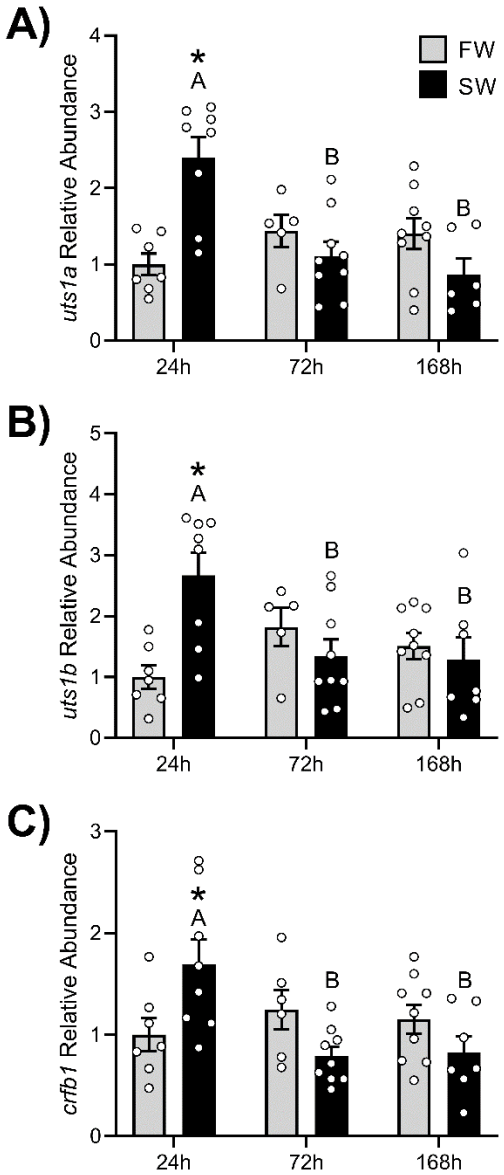


Figure 6. Changes in transcript levels of (A) urotensin 1a (*uts1a*), (B) urotensin 1b (*uts1b*), and (C) corticotropin-releasing factor b1 (*crfb1*) in the caudal neurosecretory system (CNSS) of rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) that were transferred from freshwater-to-freshwater (FW; grey) or from freshwater-to-seawater (SW; black) for 24, 72, or 168h. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are depicted using either letters (across time) or asterisks (between groups within a timepoint) and data are expressed relative to FW fish at 24h. Values are represented as means ± SEM and individual data points are shown.

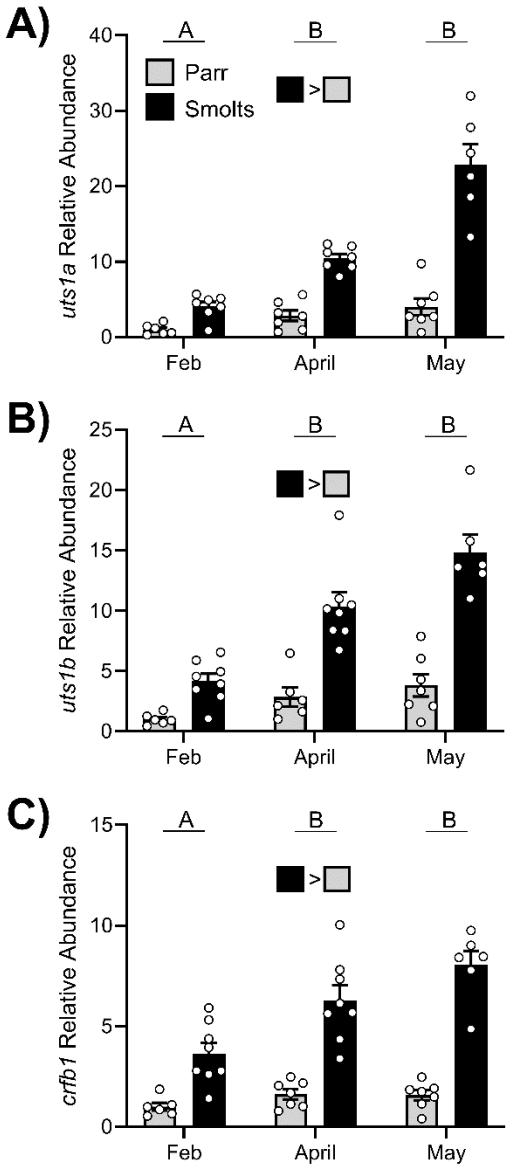
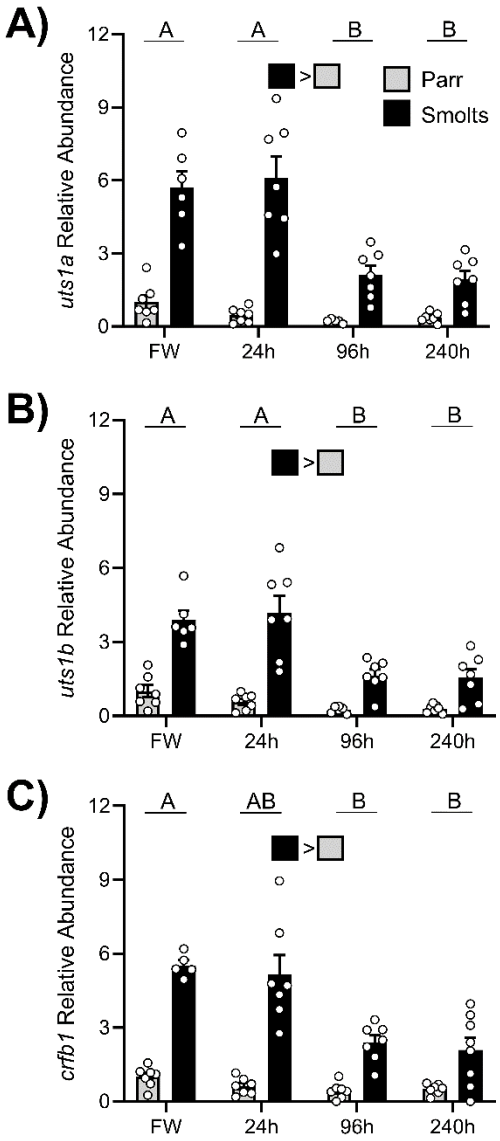


Figure 7. Seasonal changes in transcript levels of (A) urotensin 1a (*uts1a*), (B) urotensin 1b (*uts1b*), and (C) corticotropin-releasing factor b1 (*crfb1*) in the caudal neurosecretory system (CNSS) of parr (grey) or smolt (black) Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) in February, April, and May. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are depicted using either letters (across time; uppercase = within SW, lowercase = within FW, underlined uppercase = overall time effect), filled oversized squares (between groups across all timepoints) or asterisks (between groups within a timepoint) and data are expressed relative to parr in February (Feb). Values are represented as means ± SEM and individual data points are shown.



1142

1143 Figure 8. Changes in transcript levels of (A) urotensin 1a (*uts1a*), (B) urotensin 1b (*uts1b*), and
1144 (C) corticotropin-releasing factor b1 (*crfb1*) in the caudal neurosecretory system (CNSS) of parr
1145 (grey) or smolt (black) Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) that were either sampled in freshwater
1146 (FW) 24, 96, or 240h post-transfer to seawater. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are depicted
1147 using either letters (across time; underlined uppercase = overall time effect) or filled oversized
1148 squares (between groups across all timepoints) and data are expressed relative to FW parr.
1149 Values are represented as means ± SEM and individual data points are shown.

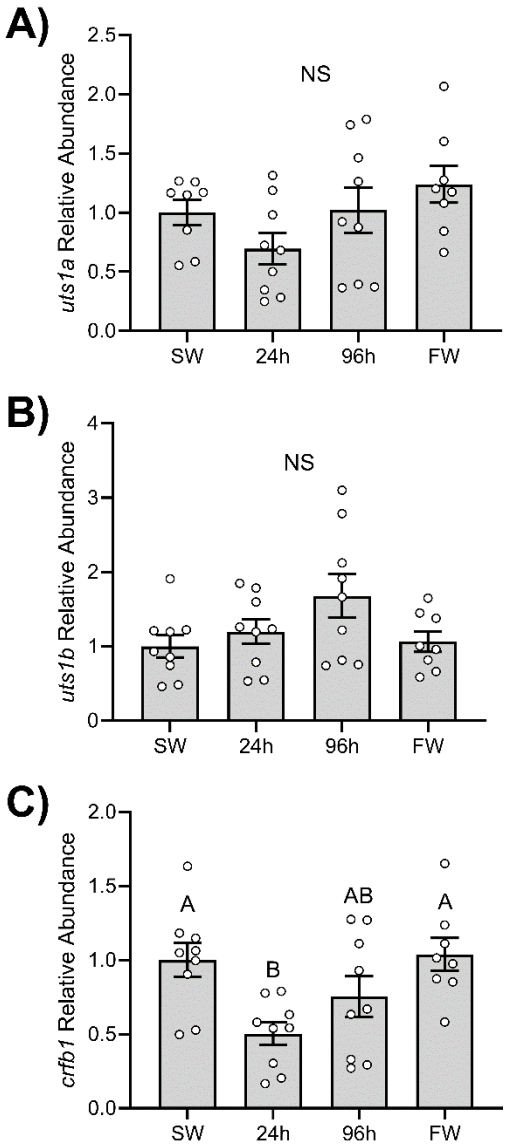


Figure 9. Effects of transferring seawater-acclimated (SW) Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) to freshwater (FW) on transcript levels of (A) urotensin 1a (*uts1a*), (B) urotensin 1b (*uts1b*), and (C) corticotropin-releasing factor b1 (*crfb1*) in the caudal neurosecretory system (CNSS). Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are depicted using letters and data are expressed relative to SW-acclimated fish. Values are represented as means ± SEM and individual data points are shown. NS; no significant differences.