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For immediate release

Taku Wilderness Association *Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy*Friends of Oldman River Society * Centre quebecois du droit de l'environnement*Environmental Health Coalition * World Wildlife Fund * National Wildlife Federation*Defenders of Wildlife * Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental*Center for International Environmental Law

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NGOs Call Stakes High at Environmental Ministerial

NGOs came to Dallas with serious concerns about threats to one of the most important elements of the NAFTA side agreement. The groups cited two main concerns. First, the citizen submission process has been plagued by delays, by limits on the public availability of information, and by decisions being taken by the Council without explanation. Second, recent evidence suggesting secret negotiations to interpret and restrict the process prompted uproar among environmental NGOs across the continent. The NGOs also released a joint statement describing their concerns.

The stakes for people and the environment are very high, as they are for efforts to ensure that NAFTA parties live up to their promises. The citizen submission process is the only process in the world that gives ordinary citizens an international forum to demand the enforcement of environmental laws.

Just moments ago, one of the ministers informally announced that the CEC Council will today take action to include the public in all discussions over the interpretation and implementation of Articles 14 and 15. The outlines of the proposed action suggest the ministers may be in the process of addressing one of the principal demands the NGOs brought to this meeting.

“The ministers are clearly positively engaged, and their proposal seems to hold real promise. However, we are cautions about the final result. The devil, as always, is in the details and in how any proposal is actually implemented.”

In addition, the NGOs called on the ministers to respond to NGO concerns with how the citizen submission process has been managed so far.

“The citizen submissions process can have a real impact on the health of people and the environment,” the groups said. “But we need the Ministers to address issues of transparency and accountability, and to remain engaged to ensure that problems are solved.”

The end result of the work by the NGOs and the ministers today can and should be to instill public confidence in the citizen submissions process.

“We are looking towards a positive outcome here in Dallas, we are prepared both to work with the Council towards strengthening the Articles 14-15 process, and also to stand vigilant to ensure that this takes place.”

To obtain a copy of the statement or to reach a representative of the participating groups for comment, please contact Jon Corsiglia, Environmental Media Services, cell: (202) 903-3387.