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MEDIA RELEASE

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US Trade Agreement signed but not a done deal until Parliament votes, say community groups

The signing ceremony of the USFTA taking place in Washington tonight Australian time does not mean that the agreement is a done deal, and is taking place even before the public parliamentary inquiries into the agreement have finished taking evidence, said community organisations today.

"The agreement will not come into force unless it is voted through the US Congress and implementing legislation is passed through both houses of the Australian Parliament," Dr Patricia Ranald, Principal Policy Officer at the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, said today.

Dr Ranald convenes the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network of 85 community organisations concerned about the impact of trade agreements on social policies.

"The signing ceremony is happening now to fit the timetable of the Bush administration for the US elections, even though Australia's two parliamentary inquiries are yet to report on the FTA. Hundreds of individuals and community organisations have made submissions to these inquiries and their voices must be heard before parliament votes on the implementing legislation," said Dr Ranald.

"Many submissions argue that the USFTA is not in the national interest. Despite government denials, health experts like Professor David Henry have told the Senate Inquiry that the USFTA will give US drug companies the right to reviews of decisions that will add \$1.5 billion per year to the cost of the PBS," explained Dr Ranald.

"Submissions have also shown that the USFTA will severely restrict Australian content in new forms of media, will weaken the powers of state governments to regulate essential services like water and commits us to adopting US copyright law, bringing increased costs for public libraries, schools and universities," she added.

"The Senate needs to assess all this evidence before deciding whether to pass the implementing legislation," said Dr Ranald.

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See www.aftinet.org.au for information on the USFTA and the PBS .