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Australian Fair Trade
& Investment Network Ltd

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US Free Trade Agreement threatens access to medicines, Australian media content and other key policies, say public interest groups.

"US negotiators have targeted the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, Australian content rules in film and television and labelling of genetically modified food in the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement negotiations due to start behind closed doors on March 17," Dr Patricia Ranald, Principal Policy Officer at the Public Interest Advocacy Centre said today. "This amounts to an attack on some of the key social policies that make Australia different from the United States," she added.

Dr Ranald convenes the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network of 62 community organisations concerned about the impact of trade agreements on social policies.

"These are important social policies for Australians, but the US sees them as barriers to trade," Dr Ranald explained. "The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme enables the government to make medicines affordable to low income Australians, but US pharmaceutical companies want higher prices. A minimum level of Australian content rules in film and television ensure that Australian stories are told, but US media companies want no limits on access for their products. We have labelling rules for genetically modified food because consumers want to have a choice about consuming them, but the US does not have them because food companies successfully lobbied against them."

"The US also wants to end the powers of the Foreign Investment Review Board to review foreign investment in the national interest, and remove requirements for any Australian ownership of Telstra and Qantas. It want to enable US corporations to take legal action against Australian regulation and sue governments for damages," added Dr Ranald.

"These vital social policies should not be traded away," said Dr Ranald. "It is even more outrageous that these negotiations are proceeding despite the fact that an independent study by ACIL consultants has shown that there are no economic benefits for Australia," added Dr Ranald".

"We call on the Minister to reject the US agenda. These issues should be publicly debated and decided by parliaments in Australia, not secretly signed away in a trade agreement which will bring no benefits to Australians"

For more information see www.aftinet.org.au

The ACIL Study is at www.rirdc.gov.au/reports/GLC/ACIL-ABridgeTooFar.pdf

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