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NGO Joint Opening Statement to the West Greenland Commission

By Bill Taylor, President, Atlantic Salmon Federation

It is my pleasure to speak to you on behalf of all the non-government organizations accredited to NASCO. We are grateful for this opportunity which you have given us. We hope your invitation indicates a growing cooperative spirit and acceptance of our concern for conservation.

The deliberations of the West Greenland Commission are critically important to conservation of wild Atlantic salmon in North America and Europe. Since the discovery of their feeding grounds off the southwest coast of Greenland, a commercial fishery has harvested North American and European salmon that are needed to spawn in their rivers of origin. In the early 1970s, the West Greenland fishery harvested about 1,000,000 large spawners each year. This number dropped dramatically to 6,000 a year in 1998, 1999 and 2000 and we are grateful to Greenlanders for their sacrifice in the name of conservation.

While the number of salmon killed has fallen considerably, the fishery is now harvesting some salmon from endangered populations both in North America and southern Europe. Very few rivers in North America are meeting spawning targets. There is no way of managing the Greenland fishery to ensure that fishermen catch only salmon from the relatively few rivers that do meet spawning targets.

The Greenland fishery definitely detracts from our considerable conservation efforts in Canada and the United States. Canada and the United States have both terminated commercial fisheries in their territorial waters; Canada in the 1990s and the U.S. as far back as 1947.

In 2001, despite the warning of ICES scientists that there should be no fishery at Greenland, the West Greenland Commission agreed to a quota that had the potential of harvesting 200 tonnes of salmon (70,000). For various reasons, including the probability of low overall salmon abundance, fishermen succeeded in harvesting 40 tonnes, a total of 15,238 salmons.

Today, the West Greenland fishery is the only remaining commercial fishery still harvesting mixed populations of Atlantic salmon of North American and European origin.

Again in 2002, ICES is strongly advising against a commercial salmon fishery at West Greenland. The best scientific advice available indicates that the wild Atlantic salmon populations of most Canadian and southern European rivers and every U.S. river are below safe biological limits.

We urge the West Greenland Commission to adhere to the precautionary approach and heed the ICES advice by limiting the Greenland commercial fishery for Atlantic salmon to a zero quota for 2002.

We recognize the economic and social importance of salmon to the Greenland fishermen and that they are deserving of fair and equitable compensation in return for suspending their commercial salmon fishery.

We urge the U.S. and Canadian governments to take a leadership role in developing a long-term conservation agreement with fair compensation for Greenland fishermen, while maintaining a reasonable fishery for internal consumption. We are prepared to support this process and pursue discussions toward a mutually-acceptable agreement with the Greenland fishermen and their government but we look to you for leadership.