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PRESS CONTACT

Ben Lilliston, Communications Director

+1 (612) 870-3416

blilliston@iatp.org

IATP Launches New Initiative on Food and Agriculture in China

IATP President Jim Harkness Kicks Off Effort in Beijing

MINNEAPOLIS — The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) has launched a new initiative to integrate sustainability into food systems in China. IATP President Jim Harkness met last week with researchers, international organizations and non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders in Beijing to discuss the program.

“Food safety issues that have been in the news recently are one reason why China should rethink its shift toward an industrial and chemically intensive approach to agriculture,” said Harkness. “By drawing on its rich history of farming ingenuity and ecological agriculture, China could build a safer, more sustainable food system with far less dependence on fossil fuels, pesticides and genetic engineering.”

China’s rapid growth over the past three decades has been fuelled in part by an increasing dependence on chemical intensive agriculture, but at a cost. China is facing mounting damage to human health and the environment from pesticides, chemical fertilizers and animal wastes. Family farms in China face a number of unique challenges, including: very small farm size; no title to their own land; lack of agriculture extension assistance; competition from cheap imports; and limits on farmers’ economic and political organizations.

“China’s remarkable genetic and cultural diversity is being threatened, as is the basis of its famous culinary traditions,” said Harkness. “A few hybrid crop varieties and fast-growing breeds of livestock are replacing a rich diversity of germplasm and animal breeds that have been bred by Chinese farmers over hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of years.”

IATP will work to facilitate exchanges between government agencies, researchers, entrepreneurs and NGOs in China and similar experts in other countries. There will be a focus on integrating key aspects of sustainability—social, economic and ecological—into all sectors of the food system.

Jin Jiaman, Executive Director of the Global Environment Institute, a leading Chinese NGO, commented, “IATP analyzes agriculture from an angle not yet seen in China; their forward-thinking approach links trade, agriculture, environment and human health in a way that is crucial if Chinese agricultural policy is to avoid the mistakes made in the West.”

“With 800 million people in rural China, and food security as the country’s priority, the swallowing of the small farmer by corporate-led, high-input agriculture is not a sustainable path for China,” said Chee Yoke Ling, China representative of Third World Network. “IATP’s experi-

ence can contribute to China's choice of the way forward.”

IATP has provided technical and financial support to help academics and NGOs better understand the impact on China's environment and agriculture upon entering the World Trade Organization (WTO). Harkness has worked on Chinese environment and development issues for over two decades. He was named IATP's President in 2006, in part to scale up the organization's work in China. GRACE and the Ford Foundation provided seed funding for this work.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works globally to promote resilient family farms, communities and ecosystems through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy. www.iatp.org.