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New Zealand Tops New Environmental Scorecard at World Economic Forum in Davos

New Haven, Conn.— New Zealand ranks first in the world in environmental performance, according to the new 2006 Environmental Performance Index (EPI) produced by a team of environmental experts at the environment school at Yale University and the Earth Institute at Columbia University.

The 2006 EPI, to be released in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Economic Forum on January 26, ranks Sweden, Finland, Czech Republic, and the United Kingdom two to five respectively. The top-ranked countries all commit significant resources and effort to environmental protection, resulting in strong performance across most of the policy categories.

The EPI identifies targets for environmental performance and measures how close each country comes to these goals. It ranks 133 countries on 16 indicators tracked in six established policy categories: Environmental Health, Air Quality, Water Resources, Biodiversity and Habitat, Productive Natural Resources, and Sustainable Energy. As a quantitative gauge of pollution control and natural resource management results, the Index provides a powerful tool for improving policymaking and shifting environmental decisionmaking onto firmer analytic foundations.

The Index provides “peer group” rankings for each country showing how its performance stacks up against others facing similar environmental challenges. These benchmarks allow easy tracking of leaders and laggards on an issue-by-issue and aggregate basis. The data also supports effort to identify “best practices” in the environmental realm.

The lowest-ranked countries—Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Chad and Niger—are underdeveloped nations with little capacity to invest in environmental infrastructure (such as drinking water and sanitation systems) and weak regulatory systems.

The 2006 EPI generates a number of policy conclusions. A country’s wealth emerges as a significant determinant of environmental outcomes. But at every level of development, some countries achieve environmental results that far exceed their peers, demonstrating that policy choices also affect performance. For example, the Dominican Republic (54) significantly outperforms Haiti (114) even though the countries share an island. Likewise, Sweden (2) produces much better environmental results than Belgium (39).

The Environmental Performance Index reveals that effective policymaking is critical to successful pollution control and sound natural resource management. “Policy choices matter,” said Daniel C. Esty, Director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy and Hillhouse Professor of Environmental Law and Policy. “Good governance emerges as a critical driver of environmental performance.”

The Index reveals that nations at all levels of economic development face serious environmental challenges. Industrialized countries often suffer from pollution and degraded ecosystems. Developing countries must confront the additional challenge of managing environmental health stresses such as water-borne diseases and indoor air pollution.

The United States placed 28th in the rankings— significantly below other highly-developed nations like the United Kingdom (5) and Canada (8). This score reflects top-tier performance on environmental health issues, but also indicates that the United States is under-performing on critical issues such as renewable energy, greenhouse gas emissions, and water resources.

“The lagging performance of the United States on environmental issues – particularly on energy and climate change – signals trouble not only for the American people, but for the whole world,” said Gus Speth, Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. “Perhaps this ranking will serve as a wake up call to the American public and particularly to leaders in Washington.”

The Environmental Performance Index aims to promote data-driven and analytically rigorous environmental decisionmaking. Yet, serious data gaps limit the ability to measure performance on a number of important issues. Incomplete data excluded 60 countries from the 2006 EPI. “A more empirically grounded, fact-based approach to environmental policymaking will require investments in data collection on a global level,” observed Esty.

“In spite of data gaps, methodological limitations, and serious scientific uncertainties, the Environmental Performance Index demonstrates that environmental policy results can be tracked with the same outcome-oriented and performance-based rigor that applies to poverty reduction, education, and health promotion,” noted Marc Levy, Associate Director for Science Applications at the Columbia Center for International Earth Science Information Network. “The ability to evaluate policy results is critical in the context of initiatives under the United Nations Millennium Development Goals to expand investments in environmental sustainability.”

Professor Esty, the EPI’s lead author, will be holding a press conference at the World Economic Forum in Davos on Thursday, January 26 at 4:30pm in the Media Centre at the Congress Hall to discuss the 2006 EPI rankings and analysis.

The full text of the 2006 EPI and a 6-page Summary for Policymakers is available at www.yale.edu/epi.

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