SAN FRANCISCO, CA, DECEMBER 18, 1998 — Bay Area Groups to Examine Human Rights and Environmental Claims of California High Tech and Oil Companies

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For immediate release

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The Natural Heritage Institute, The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development, and Human Rights Advocates announced today that they had received a two-year grant from the San Francisco-based Goldman Fund for a project aimed at improving corporate responsibility towards human rights and the environment. The three Bay Area groups will evaluate corporate codes of conduct against the practice of California-based companies [--both at home and overseas--] in the oil and high-tech sectors.

Environmentalists and human rights advocates are increasingly pointing a finger at irresponsible corporate behavior in many areas of the world, including Nigeria, Burma and Ecuador, where oil facilities have discharged over 16.8 million gallons of oil into the Amazon. "In some cases, corporations and governments are complicit in pursuing economic development at the price of human rights abuses and ecological destruction," states Michelle Leighton of the Natural Heritage Institute. "Even when governments do muster the political will, they often find it difficult to control corporate activities because they have become dependent on the money for development these corporations bring in."

Some corporations have moved towards self-regulation and have adopted "codes of conduct" or other guidelines to improve their environmental and human rights management practices. Many environmentalists, however, have blanketly dismissed such efforts as "greenwash" and window-dressing. "The reality is that the public has no way of knowing whether companies actually comply with their own codes of conduct," claims Lyuba Zarsky of the Nautilus Institute, "or even if the codes have targeted the most pressing environmental and human rights concerns." The two-year project will consider what mechanisms would enhance the transparency and credibility of corporate claims about good practice.

The multi-year project, which is focused on the broad theme of American corporate accountability, decided to initially target California-based multinationals for three reasons. First, California has a big economic weight in the world economy: were it a country, California's economy would rank seventh. Second, California-based multinationals include companies with some of the best--and some of the worst--claims and records on human rights and the environment. Third, California is a political leader, especially on social issues. For example, the Los Angeles City Council last week adopted the Free Burma ordinance which will prohibit the city from contracting with companies doing business with Burma. In the next decade, cities and states are likely to lead the effort to raise corporate standards--at home and abroad.

"California is also a state with many groups working on environmental issues and human rights issues. One of the advantages of an approach to corporate accountability which integrates human rights and the environment is that it can bring together a wide range of communities and constituencies. Thus the three project collaborating organizations will actively engage these other groups to build a broad coalition to design a California-based Corporate Accountability Campaign and to organize dialogues among NGOs and the most forward-looking industry officials to identify how to integrate environmental human rights norms into corporate practice" states Julianne Cartwright Traylor, member of the Board of Directors of Human Rights Advocates.

The collaboration of environmental and human rights groups, who have tended to work separately from each other, promises to significantly raise community pressure on corporations and governments. In addition to the California Corporate Accountability project, recipients of Goldman Fund grants included a partnership between the Sierra Club and Amnesty International, the Center for International Environmental Law in Washington, and Earth Rights International.

On January 14, 1999, a Roundtable and Press Briefing will be held in San Francisco to launch all four of the human rights and environment projects funded by Goldman.

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