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Media Statement

For Immediate Release

NZ - US COLLABORATION A FIRST FOR ANTARCTIC PROTECTION

A vast tract of ice-free land has become the first Antarctic Specially Managed Area, thanks to collaborative efforts by New Zealand and the United States. The Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in Cape Town today approved the Managed Areas status, including a comprehensive management plan. The meeting is attended by the Antarctic Treaty's 45 signatory states, along with official observer and expert organisations.

Lou Sanson, Chief Executive of Antarctica New Zealand, who is representing New Zealand in Cape Town said, "Achieving this special status for the Dry Valleys is the result of a very successful international collaboration".

The 15,000 km² area located in the McMurdo Dry Valleys contains the largest expanse of ice-free ground in Antarctica. This cold desert environment encompasses soils millions of years old, communities of unusual plants and microorganisms, and special geological features. The Dry Valleys are also renowned for their spectacular scenery.

Dr Karl Erb, Director of the United States Antarctic Program, said "the McMurdo Dry Valleys are a unique venue for research on subjects as diverse as the history of the earth and the adaptation of life to extreme environments".

The Dry Valleys are particularly sensitive to human disturbance with extremely slow recovery rates, meaning that footprints made in the 1950's in areas of low wind disturbance are still clearly visible today.

The agreement will ensure that the scientific, wilderness, ecological, and aesthetic values of the Dry Valleys are protected, and cumulative impacts minimised by managing and coordinating human activities in the Area.

Ends

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All images must be acknowledged to Craig Potton, Antarctica New Zealand.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

- Just 0.3% of the Antarctic continent is ice-free. A quarter of that occurs in the McMurdo Dry Valleys.
- The McMurdo Dry Valleys are located in southern Victoria Land along the western coast of McMurdo Sound, southern Ross Sea, at approximately 77°S, 162°E.
- The Dry Valleys have low temperatures and low levels of precipitation resulting in an extremely slow recovery rate from any natural or human disturbances.
- An area of approximately 15,000 km² has become an Antarctic Specially Managed Area with the aim of managing human activities in the valleys for the protection of scientific, wilderness, ecological, educational, and aesthetic values.
- Antarctic Specially Managed Areas are one of the environmental management tools available under the *Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty*, signed in 1991. The provisions for Antarctic Specially Managed Areas came into force internationally in May 2002.
- Antarctica New Zealand and the United States National Science Foundation led the Dry Valleys Antarctic Specially Managed Area proposal, which includes a comprehensive Management Plan.
- The Antarctic Treaty has 45 signatories and 27 of these nations are presently full Consultative (voting) Parties. Ten organisations also attend Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting as official observers and three as experts.
- A second Antarctic Specially Managed Area proposal by Australia, to manage the historic sites associated with Sir Douglas Mawson at Cape Denison, has also been approved at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting.

Relevant websites:

Antarctic Treaty Secretariat www.ats.org.ar

ATCM XXVII Cape Town www.ats.org.ar/27atcm

Committee for Environmental Protection www.cep.aq

Antarctica New Zealand www.antarcticanz.govt.nz

National Science Foundation Office of Polar Programs www.nsf.gov/home/polar