

BAY AREA WORKING GROUP ON THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

The Bay Area Precautionary Principle Working Group was formed in 2002 by a group of organizations from various advocacy communities, such as breast and other cancers, and environmental justice and health, anchored by the belief that it was time for a fundamental shift in the way environmental health decisions and policy are made.

• Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates • Breast Cancer Action • The Breast Cancer Fund • Center for Environmental Health • Clean Water Action • Clean Water Fund • Commonwealth • Golden Gate Schools of Law • Healthy Children Organizing Project • Urban Habitat • Women's Cancer Resource Center

"When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof. The process of applying the Precautionary Principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties. It must also involve an examination of the full range of alternatives, including no action."

-As defined at the Wingspread Conference on the Precautionary Principle, January, 1998

The Problem

- The places we live, work, play, learn and worship, the water we drink, and the food we eat contain toxic chemicals, radioactive materials, heavy metals, genetically altered organisms, and more. We know that many potentially toxic substances are stored in our bodies and passed on to our children.
- We know very little about the toxicity of 75% of the most heavily used industrial chemicals. Of the 100,000 synthetic chemicals now in use, fewer than 10% have been tested for their effects on human health. These substances, in addition to chemical pesticides, are widely released in large quantities into our environment.
- We have good scientific evidence that these exposures are already affecting our health and the health of our children: cancer, asthma, learning disabilities, and other illnesses have been linked to environmental exposures, and the incidence of many other health problems is on the rise. In 1950, it was predicted that about 25% of all Americans would be diagnosed with cancer; by 1997 that figure had risen to 40%. Asthma's prevalence is now doubling every 20 years. Rates of autism and attention deficit disorder also appear to be rising rapidly in children.
- Releasing potentially harmful substances into our surroundings and food is legal and permitted by government authorities, even though we have an increasing understanding of how dangerous they really are.

- Many laws and regulations require strong evidence or proof of a cause-effect link between each pollutant and its health effects before preventive actions are taken.
- Science has so far been unable to assess the impact of multiple exposures: the daily toxic soup to which we are exposed, and the interactions and cumulative effects of these exposures. Many people are being harmed as we wait for science to be able to prove direct links between chemical exposure and illness.

The Precautionary Principle

What does it say?

The Precautionary Principle says that our first priority is protecting our health. It asserts our right to air, water, land and food that won't hurt us. It says, "Better safe than sorry," acknowledging that in our complex world, scientists often cannot predict what impact toxic exposures will have on our health. The Precautionary Principle calls for us to seek out the safest ways to accomplish our activities while recognizing the limits of our scientific knowledge.

What does it do?

It is a guiding principle for government officials, companies, and citizens to use in making decisions about potentially hazardous activities. It demands more rigorous, honest, and complete scientific analysis of possible

The Precautionary Principle

continued

hazards and alternatives. It encourages us to be both cost-effective and caring, by preventing harm before it happens, rather than by trying to cure illness or clean up pollution after they occur. It can protect our health in ways that current laws do not.

How will it help change things?

Incorporating the Precautionary Principle into laws, regulations, and policies would fundamentally change the way that environmental, land-use and health decisions are made, so that we can:

- Take more health protective actions in the face of scientific uncertainty;
- Select the safest alternative technologies and materials to meet our needs;
- Require that producers, not the public, demonstrate that they have selected the safest alternative;
- Fully involve the public in making democratic decisions regarding their lives and health;
- Move closer to creating sustainable communities by preventing harm from the outset.

How is it already used?

The Precautionary Principle is already incorporated into many international environmental agreements and European environmental policies. The Principle is central to the "Rio Declaration," an international agreement signed by the U.S. at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro. In concept, it is at the heart of many environmental policies based on clean production and pollution prevention.

Many polluting industries oppose the Precautionary Principle because it forces them to take responsibility for their actions and change business as usual. It's time to move quickly to define how precaution should be integrated into laws and policies and effectively implemented.

The time to act is now.

Contact Us

For more information about precautionary policies in the Bay Area and beyond, visit

www.takingprecaution.org or contact

Jennifer Clary at Clean Water Action, (415) 369-9160 x311

About the Working Group

Who are we?

The Bay Area Working Group on the Precautionary Principle is a diverse collaborative of organizations and individuals that promotes and implements precautionary action to protect health and the environment. We create fundamental changes in decision making that build healthier, more just, and sustainable communities.

What do we want to do?

- We want to change environmental and public health laws, policies, and regulations in the Bay Area to adhere to the Precautionary Principle, and to use those changes as a model for the nation.

- We want to educate the public and decision-makers about the limitations of science in predicting harm to health and the environment, and about the need for new approaches that integrate a broader vision for science and democratic values.

- We want government policy-makers and industry to work toward ending careless and harmful activities and to develop and implement safer alternatives to them.

- We want those who are introducing toxins into our environment to have greater accountability and responsibility for choosing the safest courses of action to avoid harm.

- We want people who are affected by these exposures to have a say in decisions affecting whether and how much exposure is allowed and in the development and use of technologies that might harm health.

Join Us

We are actively seeking partners to support these efforts and become members of this coalition. This is an excellent time to get involved: San Francisco passed groundbreaking Precautionary Principle Ordinances in June 2003 and June 2005, and the City is seeking ideas on implementation. Berkeley passed a Precautionary Principle Ordinance in March 2006, and other Bay Area cities are also moving precautionary policies forward.

Please join us to see how precautionary principle advocacy relates to your community, your neighborhood or your campaigns and programs.