

BAY AREA WORKING GROUP ON THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

The Bay Area Precautionary Principle Working Group is a collaborative formed to promote the implementation of the **Precautionary Principle** in the Bay Area. The goal of the Working Group is to correct fundamental flaws in government policies that *allow harm* to our health and environment. We will advocate for proactive policies to *prevent harm* before the damage is done, and to democratically choose the safest alternatives.

Winter 2004 Steering Committee

• Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates • Breast Cancer Action • The Breast Cancer Fund • Center for Environmental Health • Clean Water Action • Clean Water Fund • Commonweal • Greenaction • Healthy Children Organizing Project • Redefining Progress • 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."

-Definition created 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, 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 85,000 synthetic chemicals now in use, fewer than 10% have been tested for their effects on human health yet these substances 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, despite the 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 is 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. We 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 acknowledges 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, businesses, and communities to use in making decisions about potentially hazardous activities. It demands more rigorous, honest, and complete scientific analysis of possible hazards and alternatives. It encourages us to be

The Precautionary Principle

continued

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.

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, European environmental policies and court decisions in the US and abroad. In concept, it is at the heart of many environmental policies based on clean production and pollution prevention, and has been formally referenced by many businesses.

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

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About the Working Group

WHO ARE WE?

The "BAWG" 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 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 a Precautionary Principle ordinance in June that creates a new lens through which all future environmental decisions can be evaluated. Berkeley passed a Resolution in support of the Principle in October, and community groups are meeting with city leaders in Oakland to discuss how best to implement this revolutionary approach.

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