

San Francisco Purchasing Policy and Precautionary Principle

(excerpted from a presentation given by Arlene Rodriguez, San Francisco Foundation, 9/2003)

In 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit, more than 100 Head's of State agreed upon the Rio Declaration which stated in Principle 15 that:

In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.

In 2001 . . . the city of San Francisco decided that we wanted to develop our own community-based version of the Precautionary Principle that could be directly implemented on the ground.

SF Department of Environment (SFE) undertook a two-year process with the community to examine the various definitions and scope of the Precautionary Principle. The work of a number of authors and thinkers was examined.

During the early stages of this discussion we considered applying the Precautionary Principle to every decision of SF Board of Supervisors. However, it became clear that we needed a model that was contained and simple. This led us to focus on City purchases. While seemingly narrow, the City purchases over \$600 million of goods and services per year and **applying a precautionary approach to purchasing decisions could have significant impacts on the health of our workers and residents, as well as spur the market for alternative products.**

SFE worked with the community to develop a broad Precautionary Principle policy statement and a separate Purchasing Ordinance that would go hand-in-hand. At this same time the City of San Francisco decided to create a comprehensive Environment Code that would create a centralized location for all environmental legislation past and future. The first Chapter of this new code would be dedicated to our Precautionary Principle statement. Chapter 2 of the Environment Code will be the Purchasing Ordinance.

Below are some excerpts from Jared Blumenfeld's presentation before the Land Use Committee of the Board of Supervisors. They reflect the deep thinking that is behind the language of San Francisco's Precautionary Principle statement:

- Environmental democracy is a critical element of the Precautionary Principle Policy. This concept reflects increasing recognition that environmental issues must be addressed by all those affected by their outcome. It captures the principle of equal rights for all those in the environment debate - including the public, community groups, advocates, industrial leaders, workers, governments, academics and health care professionals.
- The Policy statement is grounded in the realization that our world cannot be "risk-free," but that there are safer alternatives to the many toxic, carcinogenic, and environmentally

destructive practices and products in use today. Inherent in the Precautionary Principle policy is a belief that a risk that is unnecessary, and not freely chosen, is not acceptable.

- The second key element of the San Francisco Precautionary Principle is that decision-making on potential hazards needs to be based on rigorous science - science that is explicit about what is known, not known, and even what may never be known about hazards. Science provides vital evidence for informing a decision. However, environmental and health decisions are ultimately a judgment of what is necessary, useful, fair.
- At its heart, the San Francisco's Precautionary Principle calls for a careful analysis of a full range of alternatives using the best available information. This process allows fundamental questions to be asked: "Is this potentially hazardous activity necessary?" "What less hazardous options are available?" and "How little damage is possible?"
- Unfortunately in today's regulatory system lack of proof of harm is usually misinterpreted as proof of safety. The purpose of the Precautionary Principle is to create an impetus to take a decision notwithstanding scientific uncertainty about the nature and extent of the risk, i.e. to avoid 'paralysis by analysis' by removing excuses for inaction on the grounds of scientific uncertainty.
- The costs of not taking precautionary action are often very high: we've seen this in the cases of tobacco, lead, and asbestos. Early scientific warnings about their risks to health went unheeded by government agencies. As a result, there have been enormous human and economic costs, in the billions of dollars. These costs include healthcare and health insurance, lost productivity to the economy, absenteeism, lost wages, and clean-up costs.
- San Francisco's Precautionary Principle policy is the product of a two-year dialogue that was initiated by grass-roots environmental health and justice organizations. This document benefited from 26 public meetings facilitated by the Commission on the Environment. These meetings included participants from every sector of the City from chemical manufactures to cancer survivors. The result is a document that is both visionary and pragmatic.

As you can see, San Francisco very deliberately defined the Precautionary Principle as a way to bring in MORE science, MORE public dialogue, MORE participatory decision making. We are currently working on policy language to formalize the Public Participation Process.

The key to San Francisco's implementation of the Precautionary Principle is the Alternatives Assessment. In each case we performed an in-depth analysis using criteria based on the three-legged stool of human health, environmental, and economic factors to compare potential alternatives with the idea of selecting the alternative resulting in the least harm. We have applied this approach to: Pesticides, Arsenic Treated Wood , Alternative fuel vehicles, and Custodial Products.

Web Resources: (these three sites all link to each other)

--Science and Environmental Health Network: www.sehn.org

--Bay Area Working Group on the Precautionary Principle:
www.takingprecaution.org

--BE SAFE Campaign's Precautionary Platform: www.besafenet.com
(coordinated by the Center for Health, Environment & Justice)

Books:

Precautionary Tools for Reshaping Environmental Policy. Nancy Myers and Carolyn Raffensperger, eds. MIT Press, 2005.

Protecting Public Health and the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle. Carolyn Raffensperger and Joel Tickner, eds. Island Press. 1999.

The Precautionary Principle Handbook. Joel Tickner, Carolyn Raffensperger, and Nancy Myers. 1998. Download from SEHN web site.