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Precautionary Principle coming to county?

By Mike ADair/Special for The Willits News

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A philosophical principle with powerful political implications may soon be coming to Mendocino County. If fully implemented, it could fundamentally change the way political decisions are made and justified.

The new idea is called the Precautionary Principle. In a nutshell, it means that if you dont know what the effects of a given action or technology will be, you are justified in rejecting it.

As Debbie Raphael, project manager for the City and County of San Franciscos Toxics Reduction and Green Building Programs, said in Ukiah on January 17, It is no longer sufficient for us as decision makers to ask, Is it legal? We all know there is an awful lot that is legal that isnt safe. It is also not sufficient to ask, Is it safe? Instead we have to ask now, Is it necessary? We have to ask now, Is this the least dangerous, the least harmful alternative that is open to us at this time?

According to Raphael, adopting the Precautionary Principle could fundamentally change how political or environmental decisions are made.

Rather than saying, How much harm is acceptable? you say, How little harm is attainable?

Raphael was involved in crafting San Franciscos Environmental Code, which was adopted by the San FranciscoCounty Board of Supervisors in August 2003.

The Environmental Code provides that, for decisions affecting the citys environment, the least environmentally damaging option will be selected, even if it costs the city ten percent more than other options.

According to Jared Blumenfeld, director of the San Francisco Department of the Environment, Our Precautionary Principle calls for a careful analysis of a range of alternatives, using the best available information. The goal of this process is to determine whether a potentially hazardous activity is necessary, and whether less hazardous options are available.

Raphael said that by using the Precautionary Principle, San Francisco has reduced its use of the herbicide Round-Up by 97 percent since 2003.

Raphael also said the Precautionary Principle helped to break through the Paralysis by Analysis dilemma which has been the bane of many a decision-maker. It gives us a way out of this prison were in right now with regard to decision-making, she said, which is: Theres never enough information, so you cant make a decision.

Nowadays, you can have two feet of information saying its safe, and two feet of information telling us its not safe. So, as a decision maker, you cant make a decision.

The Precautionary Principle allows us to get beyond that and to ask, Is this necessary? Is it necessary, for example, to have a teething ring that contains small amounts of chemicals that are known to be estrogen mimics?

Raphael also said that the Precautionary Principle was not limited to decisions involving chemicals and pesticides.

I hope Mendocino County is going to push the envelope and say, Hey, San Francisco already did the chemicals, so we are going to wait and see what comes up. It might be looking at cell phone towers or looking at EMFs [electromagnetic frequencies, a term used to describe electromagnetic emissions]. It might be looking at a shopping mall. We really dont know whats going to come up.

Raphael said the Precautionary Principle has already been applied to making forest management and land use decisions elsewhere.

The Partnership for the Precautionary Principle, a group of county residents seeking to establish the formal adoption of a version of the Precautionary Principle by the Mendocino county Board of Supervisors, has been meeting for nearly a year, and Raphael has assisted them in various ways.

Under the directorship of Britt Bailey, of the county-based group Environmental Commons, the Partnership includes Fifth District Supervisor David Colfax, county Public Health Officer Dr. Marvin Trotter, county Department of Public Health Senior Public Health Analyst Phyllis Webb, a number of employees of the countys Department of Public Health, and others.

Colfax said the Partnership for the Precautionary Principle has been working with him to craft a policy statement which will be submitted soon to the supervisors. Bailey noted that submission could occur as early as April.

For more information about the Precautionary Principle and the work of the Partnership for the Precautionary Principle, go to its web address at www.mendoprecaution.org.