

What is the Precautionary Principle?

San Francisco has adopted it. European countries have integrated it. But, what is the Precautionary Principle?

The Precautionary Principle is a new way of making decisions that better protect the environment and human health. The Precautionary Principle basically says, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." If a practice poses threats to human health or serious environmental damage, the Precautionary Principle uses the best available science to identify cost-effective measures that would prevent harm.

How Do We Currently Make Decisions?

Currently, government decisions surrounding the introduction, use, or carrying out of an activity are based on a standard "Risk Assessment" model. This model says it's OK to use a potentially harmful product until physical evidence of its harmful effects are established and deemed too costly from an environmental or public health perspective. For instance, a risk assessment approach might say it's OK to use a pesticide like DDT until we discover direct proof that it's bad for the environment. Or, risk assessment may say it's OK to use arsenic containing pressure treated wood for playground equipment because only 1 child in 100,000 will eventually have cancer.

How would we make decisions using the Precautionary Principle?

If adopted into Mendocino County decision-making, the Precautionary Principle states we have a duty to take anticipatory action to prevent harm. Government, business, and community groups, as well as the general public, share this responsibility. Using the example of arsenic-containing pressure treated wood, Precautionary Principle-based decision-making would include:

- **A Right to Know** complete and accurate information on potential human health and environmental impacts associated with the selection of the product.
- An obligation to examine a **full range of alternatives and select the alternative with the least potential impact on human health and the environment**, including the alternative of doing nothing.
- **A duty to consider all the reasonably foreseeable costs**, including raw materials, manufacturing, transportation, use, cleanup, eventual disposal, and health costs even if such costs are not reflected in the initial price. Short and long-term benefits and time thresholds should be considered when making decisions.
- **A duty to be transparent, participatory, and informed by the best available science** and other relevant information.

Making a decision pertaining to the use of pressure-treated wood using this process or matrix, we may find that alternatives exist to pressure-treated wood used in playground

equipment. These alternatives would prevent children from being exposed to arsenic. However, the new decision-making process would not necessarily lead to a ban of all arsenic-containing wood. There may be situations where arsenic-containing wood could continue to be used, such as in marine environments where arsenic does not tend to leach out into the environment.

The precautionary approach asks whether a given product or practice is safe, whether it is really necessary, and whether products or practices with less environmental impact would perform just as well.

For further information, see:

- <http://www.environmentalcommons.org/precaution.html>
- <http://www.sfenvironment.com/aboutus/innovative/pp/>
- <http://www.sehn.org>