

Precautionary Principle

How much is enough?



Precautionary Principle - defined

Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary:

1 : care taken in advance : foresight <warned of the need for *precaution*>

2 : a measure taken beforehand to prevent harm or secure good : safeguard
<take the necessary *precautions*>

Wikipedia:

The **precautionary principle** is a moral and political principle which states: that if an action or policy might cause severe or irreversible harm to the public or to the environment, ***in the absence of a scientific consensus*** that harm would not ensue, the burden of proof falls on those who would advocate taking the action.

Precaution and O'Connor's Report

Recommendation 19 -Standards setting should be based on a precautionary approach, particularly with respect to contaminants whose effects on human health are unknown.

“Sometimes the precautionary principle is described as an alternative to the risk management approach. It strikes me that these two approaches should be complementary. Properly applied, what they are designed to achieve is not perfect safety, but a level of risk that a broad spectrum of citizens finds tolerable. This is a pragmatic notion of safety. The precautionary approach is inherent in risk management, and the need for precaution rises where uncertainties about specific hazards are expected to persist and where the suspected adverse effects may be serious or irreversible.” (pg 77 of Part 2)

Part Two
**Report of the
Walkerton Inquiry:**

**A Strategy for
Safe Drinking Water**

The Honourable Dennis R. O'Connor

Why are we discussing the Precautionary Principle?

- Comments received by other SPCs include a recommendation that the precautionary principle be included in the Terms of Reference
- Letter to MOE indicating the same

The precautionary principle is a basis for and an important part of the implementation of the *Clean Water Act, 2006* (CWA). Fundamentally, the approach of using a threats identification process, which is based on assessing the potential for an activity or condition to pose a risk to drinking water, is **to seek to avoid problems** (precautionary) rather than react to them.

- Discussion that the precautionary principle is inherent in the Clean Water Act and need not be included in the Terms of Reference.
- Concern that if precaution is exercised at each stage the results will be excessive

Balance is the key

“In an ideal world, resources would be allocated so as to reduce risks to the greatest extent possible. Where drinking water is involved, the costs associated with any particular barrier tend to rise the more we rely on that barrier. It therefore makes sense to invest in a balanced way in all five types of barriers.” (O’Conner, Part 2, pg 78)

Reduction of Risk

– not the elimination of risk



Discussion starters

In developing policies for the reduction of risks to drinking water sources the committee could:

- apply precautionary principles
- in a fair and reasonable manner
- balancing the need protection of human health with the cost of the protection
- balancing the level of uncertainty around the risk with the level of protection

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