



# Risk in Perspective

## The Precautionary Principle: Refine It or Replace It?



John D. Graham, Ph.D.

*"The need to clarify the role of the precautionary principle is accentuated by the growing efforts to achieve international harmonization..."*

The "precautionary principle" is playing an increasingly influential role in public policy toward technologies that pose potential risks to public health, safety, and natural resources. The principle is invoked frequently in Europe, and it is now beginning to enter policy discussions in North America and Asia. The basic idea behind the principle is "better safe than sorry" when regulating uncertain dangers.

Concerns have been raised that the precautionary principle may be too simplistic to guide decision-makers facing complex choices involving technologies with uncertain risks, benefits, and costs to current and future generations. The need to clarify the role of the precautionary principle is accentuated by the growing efforts to achieve international harmonization in responses to health, safety, and environmental threats while maintaining meaningful public participation in policy making.

On June 3rd and 4th, 1999 in Washington, DC, the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis will be sponsoring a policy workshop entitled "The Precautionary Principle: Refine It or Replace It?". The purpose of the workshop is to stimulate scholars and practitioners to consider how the desire for precautionary action should be addressed in both analytical and deliberative processes aimed at informing decisions that will affect health, safety, and the environment. The workshop is not designed to produce a consensus

policy position but will instead be designed to stimulate dialogue and different points of view about whether the precautionary principle should be "refined or replaced". Financial support for the workshop is being provided from HCRA's university funds and grants from the Koch Foundation, the Chemical Manufacturers Association, and the Chlorine Chemistry Council.

The workshop will begin with an introductory panel on the history of the precautionary principle, including definitions, rationale, applications, and implementation issues. We will then learn from four panels that will examine the role of the precautionary principle in the following regulatory case studies: biotechnology, synthetic chemicals, electric and magnetic fields, and global climate change. A final panel will discuss the ramifications of the precautionary principle for the use of formal analytical tools and the selection of processes for public deliberation. In addition to the invited speakers and discussants, we anticipate an audience of about 100 opinion leaders, stakeholders, and public servants.

HCRA will be preparing two post-workshop products for broader dissemination. An issue of RISK IN PERSPECTIVE will highlight the themes of the workshop while a journal issue will feature the major workshop papers.

## 2 The Precautionary Principle (continued)

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Risk Analysis  
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hcra.html

### June 3rd

Panel 1:  
8:30am - 10:00am

#### The Precautionary Principle: A European Perspective

*Speaker:* Peter Sand, University of Munich

#### The Precautionary Principle: An American Perspective

*Speaker:* John Applegate, Indiana University at Bloomington

#### Proposed Exceptions to the Precautionary Principle

*Speaker:* John D. Graham, Harvard School of Public Health

Panel 2:  
10:30am - 12:00pm

#### Precautionary Principle and Biotechnology

*Speaker:* Richard Stewart, New York University

*Discussants:* Joyce Tait, Scottish Universities Policy Research and Advice Network  
Gary Marchant, Kirkland & Ellis

Panel 3:  
1:30pm - 3:00pm

#### Precautionary Principle and Chemical Regulation

*Speaker:* Wendy Wagner, Case Western Reserve Law School

*Discussants:* Rae Zimmerman, Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, NYU  
Gail Charnley, HealthRisk Strategy

Panel 4:  
3:30pm - 5:00pm

#### Precautionary Principle and Electric and Magnetic Fields

*Speaker:* Ralph Keeney, Pros & Cons Consulting

*Discussants:* Leeka Kheifets, EPRI  
Timothy McDaniels, University of British Columbia

### June 4th

Panel 5:  
8:30am - 10:00am

#### Precautionary Principle and Global Climate Change

*Speaker:* David Montgomery, Charles River Associates

*Discussants:* James Hammitt, Harvard School of Public Health  
Timothy O'Riordan, University of East Anglia, UK

Panel 6:  
10:30am - 12:00pm

#### Formal Analysis, Public Participation, and the Precautionary Principle

*Speaker:* Ortwin Renn, Akademie für Technikfolgenabschätzung, Germany

*Discussants:* Jonathan Wiener, Duke/Harvard Law Schools  
Frank Cross, University of Texas Business School

### How to Attend

#### ***“The Precautionary Principle: Refine It or Replace It?”***

**June 3-4, 1999**

Hotel Washington 515 15th Street, NW Washington, DC 20004 (202) 638-5900

**Fee:** \$175 (fee waived for government agency and congressional staff) On Site Registration full price.  
Not to exceed 150 participants. Continental breakfast and lunch will be provided.

To Register please send the below completed application and check or money order to:

**Precautionary Principle  
Harvard Center for Risk Analysis  
718 Huntington Avenue, 2nd Floor  
Boston, MA 02115**

**via facsimile to (617) 432-0190 or  
via email to lkoonce@hsph.harvard.edu**

### FURTHER READING

Bodansky D, “Scientific Uncertainty and the Precautionary Principle,” *Environment*, vol. 33(7), September, 1991, pp. 4-5, 43-44.

Cameron J, Abouchar J, “The Precautionary Principle: A Fundamental Principle of Law and Policy for the Protection of the Global Environment,” *Boston College International and Comparative Law Review*, vol. 14, 1991, pp. 1-27.

Cross FB, “Paradoxical Perils of the Precautionary Principle,” *Washington and Lee Law Review*, vol. 53, 1996, pp. 851-925.

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