

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Mendocino Partnership for the Precautionary Principle

1. What is the Precautionary Principle?

It's the common sense idea behind many sayings: "Be careful." "Better safe than sorry." "Look before you leap." "First do no harm." And, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

The Precautionary Principle is a guiding framework for decision-making that anticipates how our actions will affect the environment and health of future generations. When it is apparent that an activity is a potential threat to the environment or human health, full scientific certainty is not necessary to initiate precautionary action.

Precautionary decision-making is based on a thorough examination of alternatives, transparency, participatory democracy, and prevention of harm.

2. Why should we adopt the Precautionary Principle now?

To support a healthy future of our communities, we need to make decisions with greater care than we have in the past. The effects of careless and harmful activities have accumulated over the years. Humans and the rest of the natural world have a limited capacity to absorb and overcome this harm. There are plenty of warning signs:

- Chronic diseases and conditions affect more than 100 million men, women, and children in the United States—more than a third of the population. Cancer, asthma, Alzheimer's disease, autism, birth defects, developmental disabilities, diabetes, endometriosis, infertility, multiple sclerosis, and Parkinson's disease are becoming increasingly common.
- In laboratory animals, wildlife, and humans, considerable evidence documents a link between levels of environmental contamination and malignancies, birth defects, reproductive problems, impaired behavior, and impaired immune system function. Scientists' growing understanding of how biological systems develop and function leads to similar conclusions.
- Other warning signs are the dying off of plant and animal species, the destruction of ecosystems, the depletion of stratospheric ozone, and climate change.

Serious, evident effects such as endocrine disruption, cancer, the disappearance of species, and the degradation of water quality can seldom be linked decisively to a single cause. With the Precautionary Principle, protective action could be taken without waiting for full scientific certainty.

3. Can the Precautionary Principle be used in government decision-making?

Yes. Everyday our local governments make decisions that affect our well-being and the well-being of future generations. By using the Precautionary Principle we can begin to make wiser decisions in the face of uncertainty. Examples of governmental bodies using the Precautionary Principle include:

- The County and City of San Francisco has adopted an ordinance for the use of the Precautionary Principle. The first implementation of the ordinance has been applied to purchasing decisions.
- The Los Angeles and Boston Unified School Districts have adopted the Precautionary Principle to limit pesticide use in schools.
- Legislation has been introduced in New York that would apply the Principle to state funded new technologies.
- Massachusetts is considering Precautionary Principle legislation governing the phase-out of certain chemicals.
- Internationally, the Precautionary Principle is being applied to govern genetically modified organisms and some toxic chemicals.

4. How would Mendocino County begin to implement and use the Precautionary Principle in its decision-making?

A. The first step towards implementing the Precautionary Principle involves the adoption of a Precautionary Principle ordinance for Mendocino County. Adoption of the Precautionary Principle will ensure that the Principle and its resulting framework will be used for decision-making.

B. An ordinance can be adopted by the Board of Supervisors at the encouragement of residents, organizations, businesses, and government officials of Mendocino County. In adopting an ordinance, we are committing ourselves to a new method and process of decision-making that includes:

- Exploring alternatives to potentially harmful actions, especially “clean” technologies that eliminate waste and toxic substances
- Working toward goals that protect health and the environment through less harmful and more sustainable land-use decisions
- Bringing democracy and transparency to decisions affecting health, the environment, and future generations

C. How each department will use the Precautionary Principle is yet to be determined. Each department will begin to apply the Precautionary Principle in a measured and deliberate way. For example, the City/County of San Francisco adopted the Precautionary Principle in 2003. Its departments are now applying the Principle in pilot projects that will serve as models for how the Precautionary Principle will be used in future projects. When the Precautionary Principle is adopted in Mendocino County, its application within individual government departments will evolve over time.

5. We already have lots of environmental and health regulations. Aren't we already taking precautions?

Many health and environmental regulations are intended to be precautionary, but in practice they are based on how much harm can be absorbed by people or the environment (Risk Assessment). "Risk assessment" is used to determine how much harm is allowable. For example:

<i>Law/Regulation</i>	<i>Intent</i>	<i>In Practice</i>
Clean Water Act	Maintain the integrity of our waters	Toxic pollutants are <i>accepted</i> at certain levels rather than prevented
Clean Air Act	To protect and enhance the quality of the Nation's air resources to promote public health and welfare	Sets air quality standards establishing acceptable levels for minimizing exposure to hazardous pollutants
Wilderness Act	An enduring resource of wilderness	<i>Permits</i> building and motorized traffic while restricting traditional sustainable activities of native populations

Perhaps the greatest weakness in most conservation and toxics policies is that they are based on the expectation that science can and must provide definitive proof of harm before protective action is taken. This assumption creates a loophole in regulations, giving the benefit of the doubt to products, technologies, and development projects, even those that are likely to have harmful side effects. Our environmental policies do not provide for democratic participation at the outset of decision-making. Finally, our health and environmental laws are often undermined, overridden, and poorly enforced.

6. Why should we take action before science tells us what is harmful?

The body of scientific knowledge is always changing. If we wait for certainty it is often too late and harm has already occurred. For example, smoking was strongly suspected of causing lung cancer long before the link was demonstrated conclusively. By then, many smokers died of lung cancer. But many people informally applied the Precautionary Principle and quit smoking because of the growing evidence that smoking was linked to lung cancer.

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7. Does using the Precautionary Principle mean practices will be banned?

It is not the intent of the Precautionary Principle to ban products or activities but rather to review a full range of alternatives to potential harm. The Precautionary Principle ensures that we as a county make fully informed decisions, examine less harmful or resource intensive alternatives, and that decisions be made in a fully informed, transparent, and democratic manner.

Using the example of chromated copper arsenate (CCA) treated wood which includes cancer causing arsenic; we may find that arsenic-containing wood is perfectly acceptable for use in pier pilings where the arsenic is unlikely to leach in salt water environments. However, we may find that CCA wood used in play structures at parks is likely to increase the cancer risks for children using those play structures. Therefore, the county may choose an alternative to CCA treated wood. These decisions would be made in a transparent and democratic manner.

8. How will the Precautionary Principle affect our local economy?

Applying the Precautionary Principle will support a strong local economy for the future. Preventative policies encourage the exploration of better, safer, and often less costly alternatives. Using the Precautionary Principle may serve to prevent expenses associated with long-term cleanup resulting from prior poor decisions. As public awareness grows, these practices represent not only good ethics but also smart business.

9. How Can I Learn More?

The following list contains first-rate resources so you can learn more about the Precautionary Principle and how it might be used in Mendocino County.

- Mendocino County Partnership for the Precautionary Principle, www.mendoprecaution.org
- Environmental Commons, www.environmentalcommons.org
- San Francisco Department of the Environment, www.sfenvironment.com/aboutus/innovative/pp/
- Raffensperger, Carolyn & Joel Tickner, *Protecting Public Health and the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle* (Washington: Island Press, 1999). Provides a comprehensive theoretical, historical, and practical basis for the precautionary principle.
- O'Brien, Mary. *Making Better Environmental Decisions: An Alternative to Risk Assessment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000) mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?tid=3632&ttype=2
- Bay Area Working Group on the Precautionary Principle, www.TakingPrecaution.org
- Science and Environmental Health Network, www.sehn.org/precaution.html
- The Precautionary Principle Project; Sustainable development, natural resource management, and biodiversity conservation. www.pprinciple.net/index.html

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