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Better safe than sorry

[Ruth Rosen](#)

Thursday, June 19, 2003

San Francisco Chronicle

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SAN FRANCISCO is poised to become the first city in the nation to adopt the Precautionary Principle -- a new policy framework widely used in western and northern European countries for developing laws that protect our health and environment.

For years, Bay Area leaders from the breast cancer, public health, environmental health and environmental justice communities have worked to promote the Precautionary Principle.

Next week, as a result of their hard work, the Board of Supervisors is expected to pass -- and Mayor Willie Brown to sign -- a new environmental code that embraces the Precautionary Principle as the lens through which future regulations will be evaluated.

So just what is this Precautionary Principle?

It is a way of thinking that seeks to prevent diseases caused by environmental pollution.

The Precautionary Principle shifts the burden of proof. Rather than asking, "How much harm is allowable?" it forces us to consider, "How little harm is possible?"

When science cannot yet fully establish a cause-and-effect relationship, but can provide reasonable evidence of harm, this principle urges us to take precautionary measures. In other words, if we wait until we're absolutely certain, we've probably waited too long.

Think about how much time passed, despite early scientific warnings, before we addressed the dangers posed by lead, cigarettes and asbestos. Had we acted sooner, we might have spared many lives.

Will the new ordinance make any difference? "Yes," said Jared Blumenfeld, who heads San Francisco's Department of the Environment. "The world cannot be 'risk-free,' but there are safer alternatives to the many toxic, carcinogenic and environmentally destructive practices and products in use today."

The Precautionary Principle, Blumenfeld pointed out, forces us to reframe the questions faced by government officials. Instead of asking, for example, "How much air pollution from fossil fuels should we tolerate in the Bay Area before we're absolutely certain it causes respiratory illnesses?", the Precautionary Principle directs us to look for cleaner sources of sustainable energy.

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Those who worked for this change wanted government to protect us from unnecessary harm. "Regulations and laws are not protecting our health and environment from the onslaught of harmful chemicals we are exposed to," said Jeanne Rizzo, executive director of the Breast Cancer Fund. "The Precautionary Principle is the starting point for prevention."

Preventing harm is nothing new in California, which has a long tradition of pioneering legislation and policies on the behalf of public health and the environment. Don't forget that this was the first state to measure air pollution, to develop standards for protecting public health from automotive emissions and to require labeling of toxic hazards in consumer products.

"Requiring explicit consideration of 'precautionary principles,' " said Devra Davis, an environmental health epidemiologist at Carnegie Mellon University, "will provide an important, symbolic contribution to California's long-standing tradition of promoting cleaner, greener and more efficient environmental policies."

Don't be surprised if this environmental code spreads to other cities and counties. Berkeley, for example, is already examining San Francisco's nearly minted ordinance. One day, political candidates -- eager to demonstrate their environmental credentials to voters -- may even compete to promote the Precautionary Principle in their stump speeches. If that should happen, we can thank those environmental health organizations and activists who have launched San Francisco as a leader in the movement to protect our environmental health.

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