

## TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WINGSPREAD STATEMENT ON PRECAUTION

By Carolyn Raffensperger

Today I am lighting candles in celebration of the tenth birthday of the [Wingspread Consensus Statement](#) on the [Precautionary Principle](#). Ten years ago this week a group of about 30 people met in Racine Wisconsin at the Wingspread Conference Center and drafted the Wingspread Statement.

There are three reasons for celebrating. First, the precautionary principle is making real headway in policy. Second, the environmental community has been able to unite under the precaution tent, joining forces and making common cause. The world is different because we've been able to collaborate rather than compete. Third, we still have a long way to go before we fully implement precaution and stop sliding toward planetary disaster. This means that there is meaningful work ahead for all of us. So don't retire yet!

A review of the past ten years tells the story of an extraordinary effort to rewrite and put into play an entirely new approach to making environmental decisions. Activists around the country found ways to use the simple idea of taking action to prevent harm and make it policy in various jurisdictions. They took seriously finding alternatives to damaging technologies. They discovered ways to reverse the burden of proof and make polluters pay. And they insisted that as affected stakeholders they had to have a voice in the decision.

School districts began the trend toward precautionary policies because of the unassailable logic that protecting children in their day-to-day lives was a first order of business. The Los Angeles Unified School District led the way by requiring that the principle and Integrated Pest Management guide pesticide policy. At the other end of the government spectrum, a couple of international treaties, one on persistent organic pollutants and the other on biodiversity, drove the principle into hard law (and of course, also driving the anti-precaution United States crazy).

San Francisco stunned the world by its thorough and thoughtful [precautionary principle ordinance](#), adopted in 2003. They set the high water mark for precautionary policies, although King County/Seattle Washington is in the running because it is the only jurisdiction with a staff person whose entire portfolio is devoted to the precautionary principle.

Oddly enough, businesses were -- and are -- sometimes ahead of government. They can move faster than government and often do. Kaiser Permanente adopted the principle as its compass for chemicals policy and food policy within its clinics and hospitals. Other progressive companies like Seventh Generation, Dell, Samsung, Bristol-Myers Squibb have adopted precaution as well.

And then of course there is academia. So often our universities are

hamstrung by big donations by corporations. But in the face of many obstacles, our scholar allies have produced an amazing body of work in journals and books documenting the rigor, the sound philosophy and methodological applications of the precautionary principle. This has been particularly visible and valuable in public health and related fields.

None of this would have happened without an extraordinary collegiality on the part of the environmental community -- activists, academicians, funders, and even government and business personnel. While I have an honor roll ticker tape scrolling through my head, I am not going to mention many people by name because we all did this together. From the Wingspread Conference until this moment, so many people have joined their efforts and shared the credit. Yes, we often struggled to get money for this work, but we were able to water a thousand flowers so all could bloom rather than tending a single hot-house group or idea.

Is our work done? Not by a long shot. The statistics, trends, relentless news stories all paint the same dire picture. But also on the horizon are visionary new activists (we know who you are), and a growing cache of emerging ideas. That cache contains new disciplines like biomimicry, ecological medicine, green chemistry and engineering, ecological economics and life cycle assessment. But it also contains some new possibilities for policy and law such as the commons are the basis of the economy, government should take seriously its responsibility as the trustee of the commons for this and future generations, and legal guardianship of future generations.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to three groups -- our elders in the environmental movement who keep us on track because they've distilled what is truly important (track the money and power spoor, don't waste time by in-fighting, history matters, think really long-term....). We are also indebted to our environmental justice colleagues for keeping us honest about the implications of the precautionary principle and finding new ways to advance it. The California EPA adopted the precautionary approach and cumulative impacts as its decision-making policies for environmental justice. The Indigenous Environmental Network has been gracious but relentless in reminding us that the precautionary principle is identical to making decisions with the Seventh Generation in mind. And a heartfelt thank you to foundation personnel who took a big risk on the precautionary principle -- especially those foundations that funded the Wingspread conference -- and gave us that seed money.

So I take it back. I am not lighting candles. I don't need to. Each of you who worked on this over the years is the candle lighting our path to the future. On behalf of future generations, Thank You.

=====

Press Release ([Science & Environmental Health Network](#))

January 26, 1998

## Wingspread Conference on the Precautionary Principle

Last weekend at an historic gathering at Wingspread, headquarters of the Johnson Foundation, scientists, philosophers, lawyers and environmental activists, reached agreement on the necessity of the Precautionary Principle in public health and environmental decision-making. The key element of the principle is that it incites us to take anticipatory action in the absence of scientific certainty.

At the conclusion of the three-day conference, the diverse group issued a statement calling for government, corporations, communities and scientists to implement the "precautionary principle" in making decisions.

The 32 conference participants included treaty negotiators, activists, scholars and scientists from the United States, Canada and Europe. The conference was called to define and discuss implementing the precautionary principle, which has been used as the basis for a growing number of international agreements. The idea of precaution underpins some U.S. policy, such as the requirement for environmental impact statements before major projects are launched using federal funds. But most existing laws and regulations focus on cleaning up and controlling damage rather than preventing it. The group concluded that these policies do not sufficiently protect people and the natural world.

Participants noted that current policies such as risk assessment and cost-benefit analysis give the benefit of the doubt to new products and technologies, which may later prove harmful. And when damage occurs, victims and their advocates have the difficult task of proving that a product or activity was responsible. The precautionary principle shifts the burden of proof, insisting that those responsible for an activity must vouch for its harmlessness and be held responsible if damage occurs. The issues of scientific uncertainty, economics, environmental and public health protection which are embedded in the principle make this extremely complex. We invite your thought and conversation on these topics.

=====

Here is the text of the [The Wingspread Consensus Statement on the Precautionary Principle](#):

The release and use of toxic substances, the exploitation of resources, and physical alterations of the environment have had substantial unintended consequences affecting human health and the environment. Some of these concerns are high rates of learning deficiencies, asthma, cancer, birth defects and species extinctions; along with global climate change, stratospheric ozone depletion and worldwide contamination with toxic substances and nuclear materials.

We believe existing environmental regulations and other decisions,

particularly those based on risk assessment, have failed to protect adequately human health and the environment -- the larger system of which humans are but a part.

We believe there is compelling evidence that damage to humans and the worldwide environment is of such magnitude and seriousness that new principles for conducting human activities are necessary.

While we realize that human activities may involve hazards, people must proceed more carefully than has been the case in recent history. Corporations, government entities, organizations, communities, scientists and other individuals must adopt a precautionary approach to all human endeavors.

Therefore, it is necessary to implement the Precautionary Principle: When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.

In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof.

The process of applying the Precautionary Principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties. It must also involve an examination of the full range of alternatives, including no action.

=====

Carolyn Raffensperger is executive director of the [Science and Environmental Health Network](#) in Ames, Iowa.

Conference Partners: The Wingspread Conference on the Precautionary Principle was convened by the Science and Environmental Health Network, an organization that links science with the public interest, and by the Johnson Foundation, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, the CS Fund and the Lowell Center for Sustainable Production at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell.