

Talking **Precaution**

Messaging Tips and Talking Points for Precautionary Action

Prepared by the *smart*Meme Collective
For The First National Conference on Precaution
June 9th – 11th, 2006

Contents

I.	Using this Document	3
II.	Defining Precaution	3
III.	Audience(s)	3
IV.	Framing Precaution	4
	Ingenuity/Innovation: New Problem Solving Tool	4
	Vision/Aspirational: Which future?	4
	Economic: Precaution Pays	5
	Justice: Putting a Stop to Reckless Endangerment	6
	Democracy: We the People Decide	6
V.	Responding to FAQs on the Precautionary Principle.	7
VI.	Using Story-Based Strategies for Change	10
	Speaking Through Sympathetic Characters	10
	Engaging Values With Core Messaging	10
	Connect With Action/Images	10
	Offer Vision (Tell The Future)	10
VII.	Pitfalls To Avoid	11
VIII.	Messaging Obstacles for the Precautionary Principle	11
IX.	About smartMeme	12
X.	Acknowledgements and Thanks	12

I. Using this Document

As the movements for precautionary action grow and deepen we will need to be communicating our message both *broadly* to mobilize many different constituencies, and *deeply* to various decision makers to implement real change. This document is an effort to provide some common starting points for grassroots activists to communicate about a precautionary approach. It is intended as a tool to support existing organizing and to strengthen the messaging work already in place around the Precautionary Principle.

The frames and talking points below can be thought of as some common melodies that are already reverberating around the precautionary movements. However, to be the most effective these melodies will need their own localized harmonies and improvisations. Messaging is not a one size fits all pursuit and to be effective it must be tied to local organizing and political conditions. We hope these frames and talking points will be helpful starting points for developing local and issue specific precautionary messaging. Some of the ideas below were first explored in *smartMeme*'s October 2004 report "Throwing Precaution to the Wind." Others have evolved through our collaboration with a wide number of inspiring organizations, activists and visionaries in the broader precautionary movement. We are indebted to all of them for not only teaching us about this work, but also inspiring us to believe that it can and will change the world.

Through out this document the acronym PP will be used as a stand-in for Precautionary Principle, Precautionary Action, Precautionary Approach etc. The term PP advocates is intended to refer to the wide range of grassroots activists from different issue areas and movements who are promoting precautionary approaches.

II. Defining Precaution

The precautionary principle is the simple but profound idea that: 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 have not been fully established scientifically. All definitions of the precautionary principle contain the following three core elements: (1) When there is reasonable threat of harm (2) and scientific uncertainty (3) then we have a duty to act to prevent harm.

This principle informs many types of precautionary actions including: setting goals, monitoring affects, considering ALL the evidence and consequences, heeding early warnings of harm, engaging affected persons in democratic decision-making, choosing the safest alternative, giving the benefit of the doubt to nature and public health and more! The conference packet includes platforms and statements on precaution, including the Wingspread Statement, BE SAFE Platform, Alliance for A Healthy Tomorrow Platform, Louisville Charter and Copenhagen Charter.

III. Audience(s)

The first rule of effective messaging is to *know your audience*. You must have an intention about specifically whom you are trying to reach in order to select the appropriate message, and mode of message delivery. This documents is intended to help communicate to:

Your constituency	First and foremost, your base must be equipped to understand the Precautionary Principle, its relevance, how it is different from the status quo (a risk assessment framework etc.), and be able to communicate that to others.
Your allies	Allied and potentially allied groups (environmental justice/health, groups working on griculture, public health, energy, worker/human rights, etc.)
Your campaign targets	Policy makers, regulators, corporate decision-makers, opinion leaders etc.
Your potential supporters	People in your community who resonate with public health, environmental, and social justice values, but have not yet been mobilized to support precautionary action.

IV. Framing Precaution

A frame is the over arching perspective or larger story that shapes the understanding of a message. We build frames intentionally to encase and hold our messages throughout a campaign. Our frames invoke our story: who we are, what we want, and what values we share. You can think of framing literally as the packaging of the story, the edges of the television screen or the rims of the eyeglasses that define what and who is in the story and how they are presented. What is left out of the frame is as important as what you choose to put inside the frame. Each frame tells the same precautionary story but emphasizes different aspects. These different frames can be used somewhat interchangeably and re-enforce each other. But certain frames naturally lend themselves to different constituencies and so can be the “lead” message when communicating with that audience. For instance, the economic frame may be the obvious emphasis when talking to a local Chamber of Commerce, while the justice frame may be a better lead when working with a local fenceline community.

Ingenuity/Innovation: The PP is an Exciting New Problem Solving Tool

The Precautionary Principle is a powerful problem-solving tool that encourages innovation and ingenuity at all levels of decision-making. The principle incorporates the latest scientific understandings of complexity, inter-relation and uncertainty to help create policy that is more realistic, solutions-oriented, and forward thinking in prioritizing protection of public health and the environment.

Key Words: ingenuity, solution-oriented, innovative, problem-solving, real progress, better, new

Sound Bites:

The PP protects the health of our community through the use of cutting-edge science with a precautionary approach.

The PP helps us determine what “real progress” is and how we can achieve it without continuing to poison our children and ourselves.

PP is about asking smarter questions to get better choices and safer answers.

PP is about assessing technologies, products and practices and choosing the safest solutions

PP combines the latest science with common sense to create a comprehensive and accurate view of how to avoid potential harm.

The PP is desperately needed to supplement/replace inadequate tools (like risk assessment) which provide merely a one-dimensional view of complex issues.

This frame is intended to help Precautionary Principle advocates lay claim to progress and innovation and presents the PP as more advanced, more scientific and more effective than current inadequate methodologies (such as risk assessment).

Vision/Aspirational: Which future?

Growing awareness of environmental and health problems is leading to a clear choice about what kind of world we want to live in. Either we keep making the same mistakes (and paying the mounting price tag) or we rethink failed models. The PP is part of a broader shift towards a forward thinking, more mature culture -- from decision-making focused only on short-term gain to decision-making that prioritizes long-term sustainability. Or, ultimately, from a definition of prosperity based solely on money to one based on the health and well being of our living systems and communities.

Key Words: future generations, long-term, choices, re-thinking, historic, sustainability, turning point, foresight, stewardship, wisdom, intergenerational equity

Sound Bites:

In order to address the mounting public health and ecological crisis we are at a “turning point” where we must rethink inadequate/failed models like risk assessment and begin taking common sense precautionary actions to prevent harm.

The PP helps us make better decisions that move us towards a future in which our communities and environment are healthy, thriving and protected from harm.

PP is about heeding early warnings and putting safety first to prevent pollution and environmental destruction before it happens.

Adopting a precautionary approach is our best chance to insure that our grand children thank us rather than curse us.

The PP helps us be better stewards and guardians of our natural heritage and community health.

The PP is a new iteration of the Native American principle of thinking about the effects of our actions on the 7th generation -- our great-great-great-grandchildren. It is a tool for safeguarding our future, and implementing common sense.

This frame is an example of how to use long-term vision when communicating the Precautionary Principle by contrasting different futures. Precaution has to invoke compelling aspects of a life based value system such as compassion, cherishing community, environmental stewardship and nurturing future generations.

Economic: Precaution Pays/Economic Common Sense

The PP provides us with a road map for a new green economic boom that can help create jobs, protect the environment and improve public health. The application of PP helps us to identify and avoid the “hidden costs” of disease, environmental clean-up, lawsuits and unnecessary harm. The PP is already beginning to pay big economic dividends as major companies around the world adopt it as a new common sense standard in business. The US needs to accelerate our adoption of the PP or we may be left behind.

Key words: hidden costs, entrepreneur, opportunity, Green Economic Boom, public health incentives, prosperity, jobs and the environment

Sound Bites:

The PP is already the future of business – major companies like Samsung and Kaiser Permanente have adopted the principle while dozens more like Microsoft and Johnson & Johnson have taken precautionary approaches by agreeing to phase out toxic packaging.

The PP is being implemented in countries around the world and is increasingly being included in international treaties.

PP creates incentives for cleaner innovative technologies and industries that create a healthy economy.

The PP helps reveal the “hidden costs” of our current toxic economy. Hidden costs like increased learning disabilities among our youth, the disease epidemic, environmental clean-up and lawsuits.

The PP is a road map to the greener, healthier economy.

The foundation of the economy is in the health and well being of our communities. The PP will help us protect our most precious resource – our families – from disease and unnecessary risk.

The PP encourages advances in appropriate, smart, and safe technology.

The PP provides incentives that move us toward a safe economy.

This frame is intended to preempt/counter attacks on the PP by reframing the debate around cost and prosperity. There is also an opportunity to tell our vision of the future by casting the PP as inevitably and unstoppable spreading through the business world.

Justice: Putting a Stop to Reckless Endangerment

We all have a right to clean air and water - to not be exposed to threats to our health and well-being. Our current system of regulation is an uncontrolled experiment that is playing chemical/technological roulette with our health and the environment. The PP is a key step forward towards fairness and equity for communities who have been recklessly endangered by the failed regulatory system.

Key Words: environmental justice, civil rights, protecting, saving lives, failed system, health equity

Sound Bites:

Everybody has a right to be protected from harmful risks. The PP calls for us to exercise democracy and put safety first for people who are going to be impacted by the decisions.

PP decisions place the highest priority on protecting health and the environment, with the highest regard for those whose health may be affected—not just for those with financial interests.

The PP will help us save lives and make sure our children aren't lab rats in a profit-driven toxic experiment.

The toxic burdens of our current failed regulatory system fall disproportionately on low income communities and communities of color. The PP is a compass to help us move towards justice and equality.

The PP is a logical extension of the historic struggles for civil rights, environmental justice and community control that will help achieve equal rights and protections for all communities.

The power of this frame is to demonstrate the values of precaution in contrast to recklessness. It invokes the (historically unrealized) American ideals of equal rights and protection under the law.

Democracy: We the People Decide

The PP is a tool for insuring that all stakeholders, including future generations, have a voice in the decisions that impact us. A precautionary approach gets beyond the technocratic culture of expertism/cronyism where the few powerful interests with the most money are at the table to make decisions that affect everyone. Our communities have a right to protect ourselves, and we want to be equal partners in building intergenerational equity.

Key Words: stakeholders, all voices, democracy, rights, participation, fair

Sound Bites:

The PP is about real democracy in the decisions that affect us all – everyone should have a voice. PP brings in multiple stakeholders to shape policy.

PP is based on exercising democracy with meaningful public participation and mutual respect so that people are involved in the decisions that affect their health and community. This broader democratic participation results in a fuller picture of an issue and better decisions.

Money is corrupting/polluting our regulatory process right now. The PP will help create a fairer and more democratic system.

The current risk assessment approach places the burden of proof on potential victims rather than the business interests who profit from dangerous new products. The PP will help us restore balance and justice to the regulatory process.

This frame uses the powerful concept of democracy to expand the debate on precautionary action beyond any specific health or environmental issue area. It also provides a context for raising issues of corporate power and the corrupting influence of money on the regulatory process.

V. Responding to FAQs on the Precautionary Principle

These responses were crafted primarily with a policy-maker audience in mind but the *italicized* talking points are intended for an “activist” or allied audience.

What is the Precautionary Principle?

The Precautionary Principle is a proven policy tool for comprehensive decision-making. It is bringing people, cities, and organizations together to solve problems, avoid potential harm and create safer communities.

The PP is like preventative medicine for the environment and public health. It teaches us that when it comes to activities that can inflict harm, it’s better to be safe than sorry and easier to prevent a toxic mistake than to clean it up.

The PP is a common sense approach -- avoid harmful mistakes before they happen —wash your hands, wear your seatbelt, bike with a helmet, and look before you leap.

The PP gives us a framework to take action to prevent harm to public health, the environment and future generations.

The PP is a concept that can guide us as we assess critical policy questions on everything from food safety to global climate change.

The PP is an umbrella that brings together shared values for a diverse array of environmental, public health, and human rights issues; it is an idea that we can all unite behind and say that we are FOR!

Why is the PP important?

The PP is the next generation of public health and environmental policies that prioritize preventing harm an increasingly complex world.

The PP is a forward thinking response to the increasingly evident public health and environmental crisis that are stemming from our model of short-term profiteering without forethought for long-term cost.

The PP is a way to correct fundamental flaws in our current regulatory system by bringing rigorous, independent science, democracy and common sense into the policy process.

Our current public health and environmental policies, (Risk Assessment etc.) have failed us and allowed massive environmental damage, a mounting disease epidemic and public health crisis. We need a new approach that will allow government to take action to protect public health in the face of danger.

The PP will help us avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. The tragic histories of lead and mercury poisoning remind us of the harm that can occur when government and industry fail to heed early warnings.

Who is advocating it?

PP advocates are visionary people from all walks of life who can see that we can do a better job of protecting our communities. We are scientists, business people, environmentalists, elected officials, grandmothers, your friends and neighbors etc.

Organizations who see the urgent need for solutions to the public health problems linked to a flawed model of putting chemicals into products without thinking through the long-term consequences and potential damage.

If you wear your seatbelt, a bike helmet, install a smoke detector, or don't run with scissors—you are advocating the Precautionary Principle.

What does it do?

The Precautionary Principle allows us to take action to protect our communities.

The PP brings in a multiplicity of view-points and allows multiple stakeholders a part in the process of assessment to achieve best possible outcome for all parties.

The PP helps us ask the right questions—rather than saying “What level of harm is acceptable?” It asks, “How can we avoid and prevent potential harm?” and “Who will be impacted by this decision and how can we get them to the table?”

The PP helps us heed early warnings of harm and insure that we find the smartest and safest solutions to our problems.

Why do we need it?

We need to address the mounting public health and ecological crisis. This means we need to acknowledge mistakes and do better by rethinking failed models.

Look around—the damage has been done. We need solutions, we need to change our approach to the way we live on this earth and move from a limited focus on short-term gain, to valuing long-term sustainability.

We as XXX (fill in the blank... parents, community members, progressives, environmentalists etc.) need ways to unite around our shared visions and values and be involved in decisions that affect our health and environment.

Won't this hamper the economy?

The PP gives us the tools to reveal and do away with the hidden costs tied to ignoring the negative impacts on human health and the environment.

The PP really is the future of business – major companies Samsung, Kaiser are incorporating this thinking many other like Microsoft and Johnson and Johnson are starting to apply the PP by going PVC free. *(Fill in latest campaign victory.)*

The future is green. From clean energy to green chemistry, all signs point to a new way of doing business. The PP will be at the center of the new green economic boom.

The PP creates and nurtures opportunity and innovation. It will help us make smarter, better, cleaner technology and insure that the U.S. continues to be a leader in technological innovation in the 21st century.

The PP is good old fashion business common sense – it's a lot cheaper to prevent a big mess before it happens than it is to clean it up after it happens.

Is this just about chemicals?

The PP needs to be immediately applied to policies on chemicals, pesticides, nuclear technologies, climate change and other environmental health hazards but it is a broader approach to decision making on all kinds of policy issues that impact our communities and our collective future.

The PP is a multi-faceted framework that can be applied across issues. It is a way for us to get out of the narrow boxes that keep us from addressing root causes and making fundamental changes.

The chemical industry says it's fully precautionary and that all chemicals are regulated.

Time and time again, state and federal regulatory agencies have taken the companies' word for it, and we the public have paid the price: lead paint, MBTE, tobacco, Vioxx, etc. The PP helps us to fundamentally rethink the way we make policy for public health to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Its like Phillip Morris telling us that smoking is fully safety tested. In other words, the chemical industry is L-Y-I-N-G.

There are certain entrenched interests like the chemical industry who are resisting a truly precautionary approach because the current system rewards them for taking risks with human health and the environment. The PP however helps us shift policy away from a narrow profit motive and towards the long term benefits of protecting people's health and our environment.

What about risk assessment?

Risk assessment is a limited and outdated tool that when used alone, has become part of the problem. It has failed to protect our communities from rampant environmental destruction and mass exposure to dangerous chemicals.

Risk assessment has become an excuse for recklessly endangering millions of the most vulnerable Americans in order to make record profits for polluting corporations.

The PP is a much smarter and more effective approach to avoid harm because it allows us to use our ingenuity to eliminate or minimize harm rather than just pass dangerous risks onto unsuspecting consumers and communities.

What does the PP have to say about the fact that because DDT was banned that malaria is killing thousands of babies around the world?

Banning DDT was a landmark environmental and public health victory since DDT is a proven toxic poison. Giving people cancer to save them from disease is not good policy. The PP helps us find real solutions to problems not quick fixes that just create more problems.

A precautionary approach offers many tools to deal with a problem like malaria and doesn't necessarily mean a simple answer of saying no DDT. Rather the PP starts with the desired goal (healthy babies) and provides a process to ask what is the safest alternative? The PP involves affected communities in the decision and helps us to look at the full picture.

Let's remember that major chemical corporations make a lot of money off DDT and have a vested interest in obscuring its health impacts. The PP is science-based and gives the benefit of the doubt to public health over corporate profits.

The PP fantasizes about a risk-free world but risk cannot be avoided, it has to be managed which is why we have risk assessment.

The PP gives us a new way to manage risk within the framework of prioritizing protection of public health and the environment. This approach minimizes risks to the fullest extent while maximizing positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

The PP is about avoiding unnecessary risk by choosing the safest solutions and allowing people to decide on which risks they will accept rather than having risk imposed upon them just so a big corporation can make lots of money.

We want a world that is safe and healthy for our children, and we want to take risks to get there—the risks of pushing policy towards a healthy, sustainable vision for our community.

VI. Using Story-Based Strategies for Change

Humans process information through stories. Thus one of the most effective ways to change attitudes and provide new information is by telling a good story. A “story-based strategy” is a method of using the power of narrative to develop an integrated campaign and communication strategy. A simple way to do this is to apply the following basic elements of good story telling to your PP narrative. 1. Frame the conflict 2. Speak through sympathetic characters 3. Use images that invoke values 4. Showing your desired future. This document has already presented a number of different ways to frame the PP issue. Below is a sampling of some of the other elements of a “story-based strategy” that could be helpful for PP advocacy work.

Speaking Through Sympathetic Characters

In order for our stories to resonate, people with whom the audience can identify and trust must tell them. (Most often, this does not mean other ‘activists’!) Messengers are often times just as important if not more important than the message, because they embody the message, put human faces on the conflict, and put the story in context. Articulate, passionate, well-briefed representatives from multiple constituencies must be the face of PP advocacy. Some great PP spokespeople could include cancer survivors, children’s advocates, firefighters, EMTs, medical doctors, teachers, parents, scientists, business people, faith leaders etc.

Engaging Values With Core Messaging

Values-based messaging communicates by connecting with what people already know and hold dear. Often activists assume that people are not taking action because they don’t have all the facts about an issue. But in many instances it is not “the facts” that motivates people to act—it is how those facts touch their values. **Rather than presenting the PP as something people don’t know, advocates should communicate the principle through values that are already shared.** For instance, the PP is about *protecting our children*, it’s about *strengthening our communities*, deepening *democratic decision-making*, ensuring everyone gets treated *fairly* etc. The scientific facts and details can come after the shared values connection has been made.

Connect With Action/Images

A picture is worth a thousand words! Not only do we need powerful images for our flyers and websites, we also need to speak to people using imagery and paint pictures with out words. Here are some images and metaphors that capture the precautionary action message:

New Orleans would have had Category 5 Levees

Washing your hands before handling food

Wearing your seat belt

Child safety images – bike helmet, mouth guard, life jacket

Safe sex: condoms, getting tested for HIV (etc.)

Athletes wear shin pads when playing soccer, shoulder pads when playing football, etc.

Offer Vision (Tell The Future)

In the advertising industry they say, “People can only go somewhere that they have already been to in their minds.” This rings true for organizing too! When using a story-based strategy, work to incorporate the aspect of “foreshadowing” into the campaign—How will this conflict come to resolution? In other words —What is our vision for a solution to this problem? When we forecast the future we desire through our messaging and our images, we bring people with us towards being able to imagine and embrace a visionary solution. When in doubt—go visionary! Reframe with the big picture of a world based on respect, stewardship, and justice!

VII. Pitfalls To Avoid

Technically Speaking

Don’t fall into the narrow frame of overly complex science when you are talking to potential supporters or policy makers. Its essential to have the facts, but unfortunately it is not enough. Give people the information they need to make an informed choice on the issue, but always put it in context of what story these facts are telling us and why it really matters in the big scheme of things.

Don’t Get Framed!

Don’t let PP opponents define what precaution means, otherwise they may pigeonhole you! Power holders may try to marginalize you as “the fringe,” and your best strategy to deal with that is to organize! Build a diverse base of leadership from the key constituencies and amplify their voices (see “sympathetic characters” above). Make sure you frame the issue.

Chutes and Ladders

Particularly when dealing with hostile media it is important to “respond” rather than just “answer” a question. This means identifying artificial dichotomies or marginalizing concepts embedded in the question. For example: “Aren’t you concerned that the way the PP stifles innovation will hurt the economy?” In this case framing the PP as anti-innovation is a “chute” that is intended to drag you off the PP message. This is where “spin” comes in. You need to literally spin the concept so that the “chute” becomes a “ladder” and gets you back on message. For instance “The PP promotes innovation that helps us grow a cleaner, safer economy while avoiding expensive mistakes that hurt public health and the environment.” The response spun the meaning of innovation and turned it into a “ladder” to present the PP not only as innovative but as good for the economy.

VIII. Messaging Obstacles for the Precautionary Principle

PP= Irrelevant Mumbo Jumbo

The PP can come across as being very vague and abstract. People don’t know what the principle means in a real context. It can seem like a ‘big-idea’ without grounding. The key here is to put the PP in the context of actions taken that have improved public health and the environment—concrete stories about the PP’s application, results and potential.

Example: *The PP is changing the way companies and government around the world do business by combining science, common sense and democracy to make smarter decisions.*

PP = Do Nothing

Precaution the word conjures inaction, inertia, and timidity. It is essential that you take every opportunity to challenge this association by inserting “action” or other creative verbs into the sentence. The issue here that in the U.S., many people assume that doing something is always better than doing nothing. The idea of doing “nothing” is not appealing. People like things that are “action oriented.”

Example: *The PP gives us a framework to move beyond the government paralysis and take action to protect our communities and the environment. Reactionary policy has failed -- its time for some “preactionary” policy!*

PP = Blocking Things

The principle can appear obstructionist, negative and inherently reactive, and can come across as being about vetoing/blocking things. As above, people want to get behind solutions. Most people think that bureaucracies and government are too slow and bogged down anyhow. The PP needs to be a way to make regulation more agile, efficient, and forward moving.

Example: *The PP is about saying yes to innovation, progress and a regulatory system that works....*

IX. About *smartMeme*

The *smartMeme* Strategy and Training Project was founded in 2002, to support struggles for justice, peace, democracy and an ecological future. *SmartMeme* is a non-profit collective of long-term organizers, strategists, trainers and communications professionals who work to build a culture of strategy in grassroots social change movements. *SmartMeme* is a one-stop-shop for strategic consultation, messaging, communications and design. We help grassroots groups magnify their impact by linking traditional organizing and movement building skills with story-based strategy, effective messaging and creative action. The project applies meme theory - the study of how memes spread and replicate. A meme (rhymes with dream) is “a contagious information pattern” an idea that “has taken on a life of its own”. Memes are units of self-replicating cultural transmission (i.e. ideas, rituals, symbols) that spread virally from brain to brain. We are people who believe in organizing, imagination and the power of the stories to change the world for the better. Visit us at www.smartmeme.com.

X. Acknowledgements and Thanks

This project was sponsored by the Science & Environmental Health Network, through a grant from the CS Fund. Input and feedback was provided by numerous long term organizers and advocates working for precautionary action. Thanks to everyone in movements for justice and change everywhere who continues to believe in, and work for a better world.

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