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## Appendix A: Precautionary approach explained

From: 'THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE IN A THE REAL WORLD'  
By Peter Montague, Environmental Research Foundation,  
New Brunswick, New Jersey, August 27, 2005  
<[www.precaution.org/lib/pp\\_def.htm](http://www.precaution.org/lib/pp_def.htm)>.

The Wingspread Statement's definition of the precautionary principle is now widely quoted [Wisconsin, January 1998]:

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.

### The Essence of Precaution:

Critics say that the precautionary principle is not well-defined. However, the Science and Environmental Health Network [[www.sehn.org/](http://www.sehn.org/)] points out that, in all formulations of the precautionary principle, we find three elements:

1. When we have a reasonable suspicion of harm and
2. scientific uncertainty about cause and effect then
3. we have a duty to take action to prevent harm.

The precautionary principle does not tell us what action to take. However, proponents of a precautionary approach have suggested a series of actions:

1. Set goals
2. Examine all reasonable ways of achieving the goals, intending to adopt the least-harmful way
3. Assume that all projects or activities will be harmful, and therefore seek the least-harmful alternative. Shift the burden of proof – when consequences are uncertain, give the benefit of the doubt to nature, public health and community wellbeing. Expect responsible parties (not governments or the public) to bear the burden of producing needed information. Expect reasonable assurances of safety for products before they can be marketed – just as the food and drug administration expects reasonable assurances of safety before new pharmaceutical products can be marketed.



4. Throughout the decision-making process, honor the knowledge of those who will be affected by the decisions, and give them a real say in the outcome. This approach naturally allows issues of ethics, right-and-wrong, history, cultural appropriateness, and justice to become important in the decision.
5. Assume that humans will make mistakes and that decisions will sometimes turn out badly. Therefore, monitor results, heed early warnings, and be prepared to make mid-course corrections as needed; this implies that we will avoid irreversible decisions and irretrievable commitments.

Instead of asking the basic risk-assessment question – ‘How much harm is allowable?’ – the precautionary approach asks: ‘How little harm is possible?’

In sum: Faced with reasonable suspicion of harm, the precautionary approach urges a full evaluation of available alternatives for the purpose of preventing or minimising harm.