

Reject the Precautionary Principle, a Threat to Technological Progress

Increasingly, governments and environmental activists are demanding that producers of both new and old technologies prove that their products are totally safe. Although this “better safe than sorry” attitude may seem like a reasonable approach to risk regulation, health and environmental risk issues are not so simple. Nothing is totally without risk, and the reason for adopting new technologies in the first place is that they often improve our well-being by protecting us from the risks of older, more established products and practices. Even very risky new technologies may often be better than the alternatives. However, from industrial chemicals to consumer products and everything in between, advocates of precautionary regulation insist that the mere possibility of one increased risk should be sufficient to take useful products off the market or prevent them from ever being used.

New medicines protect us from diseases, even though there is always a risk of side effects. Automobile innovations, from airbags to antilock brakes, make traveling safer, even though they pose their own risks. And food and agriculture technologies—such as preservatives, pesticides, and bioengineered crops—help make our food supply safer and less expensive, and lighten farming’s impact

on the environment. So, by demanding perfect safety, a precautionary regulatory philosophy can actually make our world less safe by denying society the benefits of new technologies. Regulation’s proper goal should be to permit experimentation and the introduction of new technologies, while balancing the risk of moving too quickly into the future against the very real risk of lingering too long in the past.

Just as importantly, the precautionary principle too often is applied in a highly politicized manner to disadvantage technologies that are unpopular or controversial. Although many established practices—such as organic farming, “natural” and homeopathic remedies, alternative energy sources, and countless others—pose known risks that are often far greater than those posed by the new innovations that might supplant them, the precautionary principle has never been applied to rein in those risks. The principle contains no procedural protections for innovators, and it gives regulators nearly unbridled discretion to ban or burden technologies and practices they disfavor.

A better approach to risk regulation would be to more explicitly recognize the human health and environmental benefits that new products bring with them, while recognizing that existing

practices are not risk-free. Where possible, regulatory authorities should be required to demonstrate with clear and convincing evidence that new products and practices will do more harm

than good before they can keep those products and practices off the market.

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