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Precautionary Principle May Do More Harm Than Good

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Residents of a city facing a permanent threat from earthquakes know how important it is to exercise caution. Thus, it may seem reasonable for city, state or national governments to mandate taking extra precautionary steps when writing health and safety rules. Unfortunately, it isn't always clear what the cautious choice is because even commonplace activities are replete with risks. But a new proposal making its

way through the San Francisco commission on the environment tries to get around this inconvenient fact by predetermining a one-size-fits-all strategy for resolving those questions. And that could end up doing more harm than good.

Since January, the commission has been developing recommendations for the mayor and Board of Supervisors on how the city should implement a regulatory philosophy known as the "Precautionary Principle."

There is no official definition of this principle, but its supporters believe that governments should restrict or ban activities and products that are suspected of posing environmental or human health risks, even if there is no scientific evidence to support those fears.

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the new technologies that are themselves risky, such as medicines, pesticides, automobile innovations and construction practices, are intended to reduce more problematic dangers. Policymakers, therefore, must acknowledge that, while many technologies will pose new risks, most make the world safer.

New building materials tend to be stronger, new medicines usually are more effective, and new manufacturing facilities generally pollute less than older ones. Delaying their introduction solely because they are new can hurt the very people such precautions are intended to protect.

Scientific innovations always involve uncertainties and risk. It is appropriate to consider potential dangers before a new technology is adopted and to reject those

that on balance would do more harm than good. But the precautionary principle does not do that. Instead, it is based on a false premise that assumes no harm can come from delaying the introduction of new products into the market. It considers only the potential drawbacks of a new product and never its benefits. Why, then, should we adopt a policy on health and environmental risks that intentionally fails to consider both sides of the risk equation? Regulators face little public scrutiny when they ban good innovations because the innovations' benefits are often uncertain until they reach the market. Thus, governments have powerful incentives to sit on their hands until a product is proven "safe." But science can never prove the absence of a risk, as it is impossible to prove a negative. San Francisco's environment commission seems either unaware of this basic fact or unwilling to acknowledge it. "Certainly there will be times when a product or service would be stopped," the commission notes on its Web site. "[B]ut if the risk is disproved then the product or service can be used at that time."

As we've already observed, though, a risk can never be disproved, no matter how carefully it is scrutinized. Critics always can demand more testing and assurances. Consequently, the best we can expect of policymakers is that they try to choose in a way that is most likely to make our lives and communities safer. Herein lies the problem. The precautionary principle does not provide regulators with guidance on how to proceed when the safety benefits of a product appear to outweigh its risks. In real life, many decisions fall into this gray area, which precautionary principle advocates pretend does not exist. A precaution-based policy, therefore, would give near

total discretion to politicians and politically appointed regulators, leaving consumers at the whim of political deal-making.

No system for evaluating risks is perfect. But one that presupposes danger lies only in progress and never in stagnation is worrisome. When it comes to innovation and risk, an overly conservative society is a dangerous society. Life involves confronting risks and measuring potential consequences before making decisions, not just hoping that those choices never have to be made.

Precaution, when taken to its logical end in the public policy realm, can be more harmful than many of the worst technological threats. As a regulatory guideline, it poses a threat to the vitality and progress of all Californians.

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