Regulatory Studies Center

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

New Paper on the Precautionary Principle

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June 26, 2013

A new issue paper from the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST), released Monday, finds that while the "precautionary principle" (PP) "has superficial appeal on initial impression, …when put to the test [it] actually lacks the substance and content necessary to guide realistic risk decision making."

The GW Regulatory Studies Center co-hosted a panel discussion on the paper on Monday with CAST, the National Capital Area Chapter of the Society for Risk Analysis and the GW Center for Risk Science and Public Health. Lead author Professor Gary Marchant summarized the paper, followed by comments by Regulatory Studies Center Director Susan Dudley, and Union of Concerned Scientists Food and Environment Program Director, Ricardo Salvador. We will post a summary of the event shortly.

The paper, "Impact of the Precautionary Principle on Feeding Current and Future Generations," reviews the history and use of the precautionary principle across countries and considers how it has been applied in three areas: (1) agricultural chemicals, (2) genetically modified foods, and (3) food irradiation.

A long standing criticism of the precautionary principle is that it is ambiguous, not only because it has no agreed-upon definition or criteria, but because as Michael Crichton noted in *State of Fear*, the "'precautionary principle,' properly applied, forbids the precautionary principle." Taking action involves risk, but so does avoiding action, so a precautionary principle that presumptively prohibits activities without considering tradeoffs "fails its own test of being better safe than sorry."

The study finds that the ambiguity in the principle itself makes it susceptible to political pressures rather than scientific analysis. As a result, it is applied arbitrarily (to protect domestic producers, or to impose higher scrutiny on new technologies, for example).

The paper is particularly critical of applications of the precautionary principle to genetically-modified and irradiated foods, which hold the potential to increase the food supply, and improve the nutritional quality and safety of food. Strict application of the precautionary principle is inherently biased against new technologies, and "may have the net effect of increasing overall health and environmental risks by impeding safety-enhancing technologies."

While giving credit to the precautionary principle for "bringing attention to the need to better define the appropriate level and form of risk management that should be applied in various

situations,” the authors find it does not “provide a coherent, rational, and defensible basis for risk management decisions.”

It concludes “the problems with the PP are imposing real harms on society—by delaying beneficial technologies; disrupting world trade; and perhaps most importantly impeding economic, social, nutritional, and safety progress in developing nations.”