

Northwest Regional Collaborative on Health and the Environment (CHE-NW)

Meeting Notes

September 29, 2003

Seattle – American Lung Association of Washington

Participants

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Notes

1) Introductions

Among the many remarkable initiatives noted by participants, some highlights of current and emerging efforts and events that were mentioned are as follows:

- “In Harm’s Way: Toxic Threats to Child Development” training, co-sponsored by the Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Institute for Children’s Environmental Health and the Greater Boston Physicians for Social Responsibility, will be held November 8th at the University of Washington. To register, go to: www.wpsr.org.
- The Seattle Biotech Legacy Foundation’s environmental health lecture series, to be organized by the Institute for Children’s Environmental Health, will be held this winter in Seattle (venue to be confirmed):
 - January 27th, Pete Myers, PhD, co-author of *Our Stolen Future*;
 - February 18th, Jane Houlihan, Environmental Working Group initiative on body burden and biomonitoring; and
 - March 10th, Devra Lee Davis, researcher on breast cancer and environmental toxics. More details to follow soon.
- Workshop on “Understanding the Human Genome: Ethical Challenges for Public Health Policy” to be held December 2nd at the University of Washington. For more information, see: <http://depts.washington.edu/ehce>
- U.S. EPA has named October “Children’s Environmental Health” month and a poster on what you can do each day to protect your children and other materials are available at: www.epa.gov.
- The Washington Toxics Coalition and the Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition are continuing to work on restoring funding for Ecology’s PBT phase-out program. Letters to the editor at this time would be helpful. Washington Toxics is also working with Northwest Environment Watch on their breastmilk monitoring initiative.
- The American Lung Association of Washington is working on a diesel school bus retrofit program with partial funding from the EPA (for a report by John Wargo on diesel school buses see www.ehhi.org) and hosting the next round of their Master Home Environmentalist Program.
- The Washington State Department of Health is continuing to work on its biomonitoring project and environmental health tracking initiative.
- Seattle Public Utilities is working with partners to create an “Academy of Health, Environment and Living” at Cleveland High School. Also, they have developed a “Green Home Kit” and several recycling projects in immigrant and refugee communities as well as working with communities to hear what their health concerns are and to empower them to help themselves.
- The Learning Disabilities Association (LDA) of Washington is one of the state chapters working with the national LDA’s “Healthy Children Project” which is focused on educating membership about protecting children from exposures to neurotoxicants and promoting policies that support this.
- The Washington Citizens for Resource Conservation are continuing their efforts to hold manufacturers responsible for taking back their products that contain various toxics (such as computers).
- Newground Investment Services has had several “wins” recently through stockholder initiatives at Dow Chemical and Proctor & Gamble.
- The Coalition for Environmentally Safe Schools continues its slow, but sure, work integrating IPM programs in Bainbridge schools and working on local and state levels to ensure more schools are held to environmentally healthy standards.

2) Presentation on the Precautionary Principle

Steve Gilbert gave a PowerPoint presentation overview on the precautionary principle (PP) in relation to environmental health. He first noted two descriptions of the PP (or precautionary approach, which is less binding):

In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.

Principle 15: Rio Declaration 1992.

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.

Wingspread Statement on the Precautionary Principle, Wingspread conference in Racine, Wis., in 1998

He also noted his definition of environmental health is “to ensure that all living things reach and maintain their full genetic potential.”

Steve then gave historical examples of when the PP has been used in Europe and the US, even though it may not have been called that. In this context, he highly recommended Thomas Harden's book, *The Tragedy of the Commons*.

In terms of industry, he said that much of industry is very concerned about PP because it shifts the burden of proof of safety to industry and demands transparency in the development, manufacturing and marketing of products.

He finally emphasized that an outside groundswell is needed to change our current ways of thinking and begin to use the precautionary principle as a foundation for all human activities.

Discussion Highlights

- Need to consider carefully whether we use the term precautionary principle or precautionary approach. Internationally, treaties like the Rio Declaration used “approach” because it is less binding and more ambiguous. Though we may want to use “principle” we might need to use “approach” at least initially to engage constituencies that might otherwise not come to the table.

- Industry is not monolithic. We should consider companies that might be open to talking with us about the PP. If we're really going to do this right, we need to bring in all sides.
- This could take a great deal of resources, and even if we passed it, how would we hold the city accountable? Is this the best use of our time, resources and energy?
- This has to be the trend of the future. Even if we don't get this passed in the near future or in the form we want, we're starting a conversation that needs to happen. "An honest effort is never wasted." We need to think of this as a long-range, long-term initiative.
- Given the politics here, Seattle could be particularly difficult. We would need to consider pros and cons of trying this here. Would it be better to start elsewhere in the state in other jurisdictions?
- The PP has already been used in various international treaties, the Earth Charter (which it turns out Seattle has already passed) and the Rio Declaration. And in addition to San Francisco, the State of Massachusetts passed a very succinct PP statement. These are great resources for us as we figure out how to shape this here.
- We need to use specific examples of the benefits of passing the PP – stories of success. For example, show the tremendous costs of remediation as opposed to prevention. Another clear-cut example nationally was the recent story about the Office of Management and Budget's highlighting the health and social benefits of enforcing tough new clean-air regulations. Having an economist involved in our discussions would be very useful.
- We should probably start slowly and develop relationships with particular council members. Begin to build the argument behind the scenes.
- We might think out of the box and actually NOT be too cautious – how about pressing for a statewide initiative on the PP in the way Tim Eyman has passionately pressed for his initiatives?
- We need to attract natural allies like the Children's Alliance, PTAs, child care workers, etc. Also, what about Melinda Gates and Mona Locke given their interests in child development.
- Governor Locke has 15 more months in office – perhaps we can get him to pass an Executive Order on the PP.
- We should also educate journalists so they can write about this accurately.
- It's very easy for us to intellectualize about this. We have to make this practical and personal for communities, and we need to involve communities if we're going to create the groundswell we want. "Better safe than sorry" gets to the heart of it. Need to "emotionalize" this--make it real for people.
- Involve Social Ventures Network, In Biz, Future 500, etc.
- Find out how it worked in San Francisco and how the passage of the PP has changed government practices there. Maybe have someone from San Francisco come and speak to us about their experience. Some specific questions:
 - how long was their process?
 - who was involved?
 - what kind of challenges did they face?
 - concise vs. longer statements?
 - what kind of resources did they need?
 - what do they wish they had put in there that they didn't?
 - what suggestions would they have if they were doing it again?

- what has changed since they passed it?
- New Precautionary Principle Work Group established – members:
 - Elizabeth Davis
 - Kate Davies
 - Pam Emerson
 - Lise Glaser
 - Bruce Herbert
 - Elise Miller
 - Janna Rolland
 - Gregg Small
 - Brandie Smith

First action: find out more about the San Francisco and Massachusetts precautionary principle statements.

First Working Group conference call: Wednesday., October 15th at 3:00 p.m. Pam has been able to make call-in arrangements: The call-in number is 206-553-4557 (no additional code needed). The line is reserved from 3:00pm - 4:30pm. Elise will send out a reminder closer to the time.

Next Meeting

Monday, November 3rd from Noon - 2:00 p.m.

Brown bag lunch with Pete Myers.

Location: The American Lung Association of Washington in Seattle

Phone: (206) 441-5100 or 1-800-732-9339

2625 Third Avenue (corner of Third and Cedar)