

OVERTURE to the 221st General Assembly

Sustainable Development: The Precautionary Principle

The Presbytery of Heartland overtures the 221st General Assembly to affirm the vital importance of sustainable development and the Precautionary Principle. ¹ It is the basis for a responsible, moral and ethical means of working and being. It affirms the Sacred in societal and Creation care, protecting Earth for future generations. Additionally, we ask that the PC(USA) commission a study group to review this principle and prepare a study paper for use by congregations throughout the denomination, enabling congregations to advocate for reform.

Rationale:

The Word of the Lord:

Psalm 96: 10 Say among the nations, "The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity." **11** Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; **12** let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy **13** before the Lord; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

Matthew 37b " "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

The Precautionary Principle:

The United National Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) report defines the Precautionary Principle as follows: When human activities may lead to morally unacceptable harm that is scientifically plausible but uncertain, actions shall be taken to avoid or diminish that harm. Morally unacceptable harm refers to harm to humans or the environment that is

- threatening to human life or health, or

¹ The Precautionary Principle is defined as "the precept that an action should not be taken if the consequences are uncertain and potentially dangerous" (World English Dictionary. It is the theory that an action should be taken when a problem or threat occurs, not after harm has been inflicted" (UN Conference on the Environment, 1988). It is derived from a German work meaning "forecaring".

- serious and effectively irreversible, or
 - inequitable to present or future generations, or
 - imposed without adequate consideration of the human rights of those affected...
- (www.Precautionary Principle.eu.)

COMEST states that the “Precautionary Principle is often seen as an integral principle of sustainable development, that is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the abilities of future generations to meet their needs. By safeguarding against serious and, particularly, irreversible harm to the natural resource base that might jeopardize the capacity of future generations to provide for their own needs, it builds on ethical notions of intra- and inter-generational equity.”

"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, Jan. 1998

If introduced into American law, the precautionary principle would fundamentally shift the burden of proof [of the safety of products and processes for the public.] The presumptions that flow from the scientific uncertainty surrounding so many new technologies would no longer automatically operate in industry's favor. Scientific uncertainty would no longer argue for freedom of action but for precaution and alternatives.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has a long history in being proactive in Ecological Concerns. Let us indeed reaffirm the 202nd General Assembly policy statement on “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice” and the 1996 “Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Development from the 208th General Assembly as we uphold our long denominational history of seeking environmental justice.

In response to our being entrusted with the care of God’s creation, we are called to be stewards. Let us:

- Pray for wisdom, strength and discernment for all people
- Become informed about disruptors and threats to human and environmental health and well-being
- Become pro-active in our homes, and in the world , crying out against organizations who pollute and disrupt the balance in our beautiful Creation
- Urge individually and collectively, the acceptance of the Precautionary

Principle in our nation's legislation as it is already accepted in the European Union. Issues regarding health and safety of products must be dealt with BEFORE the product comes to the marketplace. Let us embrace the "forecaring" principle and advocate care for our health, the health of the Earth and the health of future generations.

.• Network to let corporations and governments know that they must take a lead to affirm the vital importance of sustainable development and precautionary principle as the basis for a responsible, moral and ethical means of working and being which affirms the Sacred in societal and Creation care and to protect Earth for future generations.

Threats to Human and Environmental Health and Well-Being: Genetically Engineered Crops, Environmental Toxins, and Nanotechnology

Genetically engineered (GE) crops are crops that are altered with inserted genetic material to produce a desired trait. Food and Water Watch, a well-respected non-profit public interest organization, has researched GE foods extensively.

A booklet entitled "Genetically Engineered Food: An Overview" by Food and Water Watch, 2012, states, "The U.S. experiment with GE food has been a failure. Impacts on the environment, food system and public health are not fully documented but are clearly not worth it. It is time for a new approach to biotechnology in the food system."

"GE crops can take a toll on agriculture and surrounding wildlife...The environmental effects of GE crops include intensified agrochemical use and pollution, increased weed and insect resistance to herbicides crops, and gene flow between GE and non-GE crops.

Once GE products are on the market, no labeling is required. This means that U.S. consumers blindly eat and drink GE ingredients every day and are not given the knowledge or choice to do otherwise. Several studies point to the health risks of GE crops and their associated agrochemicals, but proponents of the technology promote it as an environmentally responsible, profitable way for farmers to feed a growing global population. Yet the only ones experiencing any benefits from CE crops are the few, massive corporations that are controlling the food system at every step and seeing large profit margins.

New technologies — like genetic engineering — create uncertainties and risk that should be carefully evaluated rather than being rapidly pushed onto the market. The existing regulatory framework for GE foods simply does not measure up. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Environmental Protection Agency and Food & Drug Administration have failed to protect the environment, the food system or public health from GE foods."

Food and Water Watch recommends that there be a moratorium on new U.S. approvals of genetically engineered plants and animals and that the US should Institute the precautionary principle for GE foods.

“Currently in the United States, most GE foods, donor organisms and host organisms are generally considered safe for consumption and the environment until proven otherwise. The United States should enact policy that would more rigorously evaluate the potentially harmful effects of GE crops before their commercialization to ensure the safety of the public.” (Food and Water Watch, *ibid.*)

Toxic Chemicals threaten Human and Environmental Health. Presbyterians for Earth Care, in a letter to membership on May 16, 2013 stated, ”tens of thousands of chemicals remain in everyday products, such as cleaners, food containers, furniture and even children's products without being tested for safety. Under current law, the EPA can call for safety testing only after evidence surfaces demonstrating a chemical is dangerous. As a result, the EPA has only been able to require testing for roughly 200 of more than 84,000 chemicals currently registered in the United States.

As people of faith, we are called to care about God's creation. These chemicals may be harmful to the earth, and to humans, we do not know. What we do know is that the CDC has found more than 212 industrial chemicals in American's bodies, and that babies are born with chemicals already present in their bodies. Paul says the body is a temple of the holy spirit. American's bodies are temples of chemicals.” (PEC, May 16, 2013.)

Greenfaith, an interfaith coalition for the environment, with whom PC(USA) Environmental Ministries has an affiliation, has written an “Interfaith Statement for Chemical Policy Reform” which was formulated with two other faith-based organizations –the National Council of Churches USA , and the Union for Reform Judaism.

This statement notes, “While all people are at risk, some are more vulnerable. Communities of color and low-income communities suffer disproportionately from pollution caused by current and past industrial activity, waste disposal, heavily-traveled transportation routes, and consumer products containing toxic chemicals. Researchers also warn that toxic chemicals negatively impact children, expectant mothers, and workers.

“Chemical workers suffer from exposures because of the lack of public data on chemicals they use, unsafe workplaces, and lax enforcement of regulations. As religious leaders and people of faith and conscience from diverse traditions, we affirm that reforming current chemical policies is vital to protecting people and life on God’s Earth...

Government policy on chemicals can and should protect people and all life on Earth. Chemical legislation should:

(1) Protect People and All Life on Earth

- remove the most dangerous chemicals, such as chemicals that persist, bioaccumulate, or are acutely toxic (PBTs), from use except when no safe alternative is available.
- Hold companies accountable for demonstrating that chemicals are safe.

(2) Protect Vulnerable Populations

- Reduce the disproportionate burden of chemical exposure placed on workers, low-income people, people of color, indigenous communities, pregnant women, and children, and other vulnerable groups.
- Expand government biomonitoring, particularly in at-risk communities, to measure people's toxic exposure.
- Invest in research to understand and protect children's health from chemical harm.
- Provide chemical health and safety information to workers and the public.

(3) Promote a Sustainable, Healthy Economy

- Fund “green” chemistry and engineering research to create safer chemicals and industrial processes.
- Promote a “green” economy that will allow all life to flourish and bring green jobs to low-income communities and communities of color. ..

Nanotechnology is the science of manipulating matter on an atomic and molecular scale. In the rush to incorporate nanoparticles into products already being marketed to the public, comparatively little money has been devoted to researching the health and environmental consequences of nanotechnology, according to the National Alliance for Public Health, April 24, 2013. (ANH-USA.org)

We don't know enough yet about nanotechnology. Chemicals like PCBs and pesticides like DDT were once assumed to be safe—their danger was not fully understood until long after human health and environmental damage already occurred. To avoid similar disasters in the future, the health and environmental effects of nanotechnology should be thoroughly studied before more products are allowed onto the market, especially into food and food packaging. And a lot depends on the definition of nanoparticles' size, and whether they can be considered new to nature. Canada amended its national organic rules to ban nanotechnology in food production as a “Prohibited Substance or Method.”

Recommendations from Food and Water Watch are the following:

- The scientific community has clearly established that the safety of nanomaterials cannot be assumed by studying their larger counterparts. The FDA should regulate nanotech products as the new chemical substances that they are, and require at least the same level of testing required for new food additives.
- If they are approved, nanoproducts should be clearly labeled so consumers are aware that the products they are using contain these controversial ingredients.
- Federal agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration should also be required to track any incidents, including adverse or allergic reactions, once nanotech products are on the market.

