

Report on Precautionary Approach

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Report

To ensure the sustainability of ecosystems for the benefit of future as well as current generations, decision makers should follow a [balanced] precautionary approach, applying judicious and responsible management practices based on best available science and on proactive, rather than reactive, policies. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage exist, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a justification for postponing [cost-effective measures] action to prevent environmental degradation. Management plans and actions based on this precautionary approach should include scientific assessments, monitoring, mitigation measures to reduce environmental risk where needed, and periodic reviews of any restrictions and their scientific bases.

What is a balanced precautionary approach? Does balanced include economic considerations, an analysis of reasonable and necessary benefits to the species, consideration of cost to the industry, and unintended consequences (quiet ships increase risk of collision for some species) .

In addition, there is a lack of agreement on what constitutes cost-effective measures and should cost considerations be included in a definition of the precautionary approach. Some folks do not agree that cost effective measures should be included because the definition should benefit the resource.

The Rio declaration (signed and acknowledge definition for the precautionary principle) included “cost-effective measures” as part of the definition of the precautionary approach, and some believed that it was important to include this language. Others believe this is a controversial issue that would be difficult to resolve. In conclusion, whether “cost-effective” and “balanced” should be included in the definition or should it be a separate management question is still under debate.

Regarding the three questions in the issue document:

NMFS: Risk assessment model inherently build precaution into the decision-making.

An MMS example when uncertainty exists, go to additional models to build on existing knowledge and procedures.

Generally, precaution is built into various risk assessments, but these assessments also include value judgments. An area where the precautionary approach may be compromised is the interpretation of the models in the development of the final decision.

Risk assessments by themselves don't deal completely with the application of the precautionary approach. There are additional opportunities and needs for integrating precaution in the management process. Interpretation/management decision is another stage where precaution should be applied. Some proposed that precaution should be applied at all stages of the process (risk assessment, mitigation, and management decision). Others believe shouldn't have precaution compounded upon precaution.

A potentially positive example is sperm whales seismic surveys in the GOM. In the absence of information on effect, mitigation measures implemented that allow this activity to go forward.

Examples related to how an agency may respond to levels with high uncertainty and high potential for impacts include prohibiting seismic activity in areas frequented by western gray whales and in humpback calving grounds.