

Welcome Speech

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Welcome to the first National Conference on Precaution. This is a conference that you have designed—redefined and pull together. It comes from leaders across the country, not something that the Center for Health, Environment & Justice (CHEJ), Science and Environmental Health Network (SEHN) or Environmental Research Foundation (ERF) decided in isolation of leaders or the movement.

Let me demonstrate this for you. Members of the large and sometimes unruly steering committee please stand and remain standing. 60 organizational sponsors could people from those groups stand up and remain standing. Will people who have volunteered at this meeting and all CHEJ, ERF and SEHN staff please stand. Will speakers and facilitator please stand. Last but not least, will program people from foundations who advocated for funding of this event please stand. Now look around you and you'll see that this is a movement in which everyone has a place at the table, a voice, a vote and is critical to the success of moving a progressive health protective agenda across this country and the world. Thank you all...

Precaution is what people practice every day. What we will be talking about through this conference is not a new concept—but rather a paradigm shift for decision-makers. We as individuals have already decided that precaution is important seat belts, wash our fruit and vegetables and so on.

To achieve our vision—which is to take action to prevent harm even in the absence of scientific certainty—we need to move government and private industry sectors to make decisions on a different set of questions. Moving them from asking: how much harm can the earth, people and creatures tolerate to asking how much harm can we avoid.

Simple as it sounds—as common sense as it is—this journey will be a difficult one. It is an entirely different way of doing business. But when we succeed, we will have created a new definition of what “business as usual” looks like.

We have a lot to learn from those who have come before us. I have always said the grassroots environmental health movement has consistently been about prevention of harm. For example, the thousands of incinerators that have not been built or have been closed were the result of local communities saying "no" to any level of pollution and suggesting that the waste stream be managed differently and that corporations eliminate toxic materials that end up in trash.

Twenty years ago, in 1986, CHEJ launched the successful McToxics campaign around Styrofoam and today in 2006 we rolled over Johnson and Johnson and Microsoft with a phaseout of PVC, the poison plastic. This was a prevention of harm strategy—to

prevent harm in communities where toxic packaging is produced, then used and lastly disposed of.

Thirty years ago, leaders said "no" to new nuclear power plants and completely halted their construction—a precautionary action that prevented harm from radioactive materials.

Today, we're rebuilding that campaign to fight the new proposed reactors. Leaders are advocating solar, wind, and other alternative safer energy sources. We won then and we can win again.

Even when the genie was out of the bottle such as with contaminated sites, leaders have consistently argued that a permanent clean up was the answer—not a band-aid approach—as a cautionary step to prevent future harm to the environment, and human health.

Woburn Massachusetts families wanted to close the polluted drinking water well—as a precautionary step to prevent other children from falling victim to leukemia.

I worked to close an elementary school while they investigated the toxics at the large Love Canal site, as this was a precautionary step to prevent students and staff from exposure to chemicals. Schools across the country have been advocating that toxic pesticides not be used and that instead schools, parks and day cares use integrated pest management. This is a preventive solution to protect innocent children.

Thanks to our brothers and sisters in the labor movement—those on the front lines who put their bodies on the line—we have many of the links between toxic exposures and diseases. They worked to get right to know in the workplace and for communities so that we have the information to push for precautionary action to prevent harm.

We've been waging this battle for a long time—for me it has been 27 years. However, it's just been done in narrow networks or silos where serious deliberate collaboration didn't and in some cases couldn't happen.

Today is a new day and we are here to figure out how to move in new ways together with messages, frames, networks, strategies, resources and so on. Just look at the leaders in this room, labor, environmental justice, PTA's, nuclear, toxics, pesticides, mining, military waste, health care, corporations, government and so many more. This is a broad and deep effort for fundamental change.

I think of it as like a kaleidoscope movement. A kaleidoscope contains many colors and shapes but all of the colors and shapes are connected through the same lens. And when you hold a kaleidoscope you feel compelled to turn it and keep it moving. That's what we need to do with our very different efforts and issues (equivalent to shapes and colors)—we need to connect and keep moving forward.

We are up against huge resistance and power. Corporations who are resistant to change—they don't want to lose their market share or impact their profits. Government is stuck on risk assessment and cost benefit analysis as a decision making process.

BE SAFE will be coordinating the activities after the conference and helping to bring synergy to the work everyone is doing. This is an exciting mosaic of groups to move forward with and because of this I believe that we will be able to accomplish this goal of precaution and prevention.

The BE SAFE Platform has four principle goals which include:

HEED EARLY WARNINGS

Government and industry have a duty to prevent harm, when there is credible evidence that harm is occurring or is likely to occur—even when the exact nature and full magnitude of harm is not yet proven.

PUT SAFETY FIRST

Industry and government have a responsibility to thoroughly study the potential for harm from a new chemical or technology before it is used—rather than assume it is harmless until proven otherwise.

EXERCISE DEMOCRACY

Government and industry decisions should be based on meaningful citizen input and mutual respect with the highest regard for those whose health may be affected and for our natural resources—not for those with financial interests.

CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTION

Decision-making by government, industry and individuals must include an evaluation of alternatives, and the choice of the safest, technically feasible solutions. We support innovation and promotion of technologies and solutions that create a healthy environment and economy.

We can do this. Today is the beginning of a new chapter of our efforts. Let's walk this journey together and keep moving forward. We need each other to create the necessary change.