

Evaluating Human Health and Ecological Risk Assessments and Remediation Decisions: Is the Cure Worse than the Disease?

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This presentation will address the question of whether risk assessment and risk management practice should give precedence to the precautionary principle, or the Hippocratic principle "first do no harm." The purpose of the presentation is to set the theme for the rest of the session. The session is intended to provide real examples of where (and how) a risk manager balanced a conservative risk estimate against the "cons" of more stringent remedial actions in order to achieve a better outcome. We will challenge the session's presenters to consider the implications of conducting risk assessments under the premise that it's better to err on the side of conservatism in the face of uncertainty. We will question whether this principle is appropriate for protecting human health and the environment. Does it deliver maximum benefit to local human and ecological communities? If not, then what are the opportunity costs? What if an assessment leads to an invasive remedy that damages or destroys habitat or other ecosystem assets (open space, recreation opportunities, etc.)? Is there harm associated with extensive remedies that do not yield promised reductions in health risk? Does overestimation of risk lead to faulty decision-making in selection of remedial alternatives? Are we as risk assessors and risk managers doing enough to account for the risk of remedy in our actions and decisions? Should managers focus on more than risk reduction as their performance objective?