

## Environmental Disaster Calls for Precautionary Policy

We have all been thinking a lot about the environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. When the crisis subsides or enters its next phase, we should take the opportunity to step back and reassess our approach to managing risks and hazards. As a nation, we do a pretty awful job of preventing risk and incidents like the exploded oil rig leaking an estimated 210,000+ gallons a day into the Gulf and ecologically sensitive coastal areas. Disasters like this remind us quite dramatically of this fact. So this is an important time to raise the national debate on a precautionary approach to hazardous technologies. That is why we are dedicating a good portion of this issue to the importance of elevating organic policies and practices, as a critical means of avoiding the predictable health and environmental disasters associated with our current course.

### Changing to precautionary-driven policy

Often it takes a catastrophe like the Gulf oil contamination to put into perspective the urgent need to reduce our reliance on dangerous technologies. At times like this, we understand the cost of prevention and regulation is so much less than the alternative –the cost of not engaging in prevention and maintaining strong precautionary policy. Yes, it looks like we could have and now will have tougher rules in place, perhaps less collusion between government and industry on matters of public safety in the oil industry. But, will we more fully assess our dependency on oil as a nation and world? In fact, the national conversation should shift to alternative energy and practices because the risks of our current dependency are too high under the best-case scenario. We should be asking the hard questions about why we as a nation have not moved faster to embrace alternative fuels, higher efficiency vehicles, and more efficient and extensive forms of public transportation. This crisis should alert us to the fact that many contamination and poisoning events can't be fixed or cleaned up, and a precautionary approach –nowhere to be found in U.S. policy except in the *Organic Foods Production Act* and the proposed *School Environment Protection Act* (H.R. 4159) – is the only legitimate, prevention-oriented public policy to protect our habitat.

In the toxic pesticide arena, there are many parallels, and a very similar insidious destruction of our planet and health caused by our unnecessary dependency on toxic chemicals seeping into our bodies and environment at a rate of 5 billion pounds a year. We were reminded in May by the President's Cancer Panel in a new report that, "The entire U.S. population is exposed on a daily basis to numerous agricultural chemicals. Many of these chemicals are known or suspected of having either carcinogenic or endocrine-disrupting properties."

### Shifting the paradigm

While we certainly support efforts to take the most hazardous chemicals off the market, with legislation such as the unfortunately named *Safe Chemicals Act* (S.3209) introduced by Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) on April 15, 2010, we need a new approach –or

paradigm—to toxic chemical regulation that assesses our dependency on an outmoded and unnecessarily hazardous, synthetic pesticide technology. This is the analogy to oil dependency. And it is no small problem that synthetic pesticides are petroleum-based.

The key to the organic law is that the underlying decision making structure for defining acceptable practices is process-driven –requiring that the methods and inputs used in organic food production are analyzed for their footprint on the environment and in the workplace, not just for residues on the finished food product. The idea is to keep toxics out, not try to determine acceptable exposure levels.

Risk assessment and the resulting risk mitigation measures, even if they become somewhat tougher, do not achieve the needed reorientation because they allow many unnecessary hazardous chemicals that meet the 'acceptable risk' threshold to remain on the market –no matter how uncertain or inadequate that risk determination is because of limitations in our knowledge. We can either create incentives in our laws to adopt precautionary decision making, alternative practices and lower hazard products, or we can continue to struggle with synthetic chemicals that in unexplained ways cause devastation. Colony collapse disorder and the unexplained disappearance of the bees is just such devastation. Nanotechnology, with its nano-sized particles, is the next frontier of a new technology that is fraught with serious questions and unknown effects on health. EPA's website indicates the developing nature of the science and regulation: "[T]he special properties that make nanoscale materials of potentially great benefit also can present new challenges for risk assessment and decision-making. For instance, their small size may allow them to pass through cell membranes or the blood-brain barrier, possibly resulting in unintended effects. EPA is currently examining potential hazard, exposure, policy, regulatory, and international issues that may be associated with pesticides that are a product of nanotechnology or that contain nanoscale materials."

### Dramatic problems call for dramatic change

This issue of PAY calls for a greater shift with increased urgency to organic practices. At the same time that we recognize the importance of strong federal law driving organic policy and practices, the need for greater public involvement to ensure organic integrity is real. Most critical, the organic experience, and the policies and hands-on practices discussed in this issue, should inform the policy changes needed to reform our nation's approach to toxics. Now!



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