

Community Action Against TCE Emissions

WORK TOGETHER TO EXECUTE A PROJECT TOGETHER

This case study focuses on organizing community action against the expansion of Nakanishi Manufacturing Corp. in Clarke County, advocating for the adoption of the Precautionary Principle to eliminate the use of trichloroethylene (TCE), a known carcinogen, and replace it with safer alternatives, thereby protecting public health and the environment.

Contributed by:

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Jill McElheney, Community Leader, MICAH's Mission

Over two decades ago, Jill McElheney, a community leader in Athens-Clarke County, found her life irrevocably altered when her four-year-old son developed a severe and mysterious illness. After months of hospitalization and a diagnosis of childhood leukemia, Jill discovered the devastating cause: industrial hazardous waste from a nearby facility had contaminated their aquifer, poisoning her family's well water.



Jarret McElheney with his mom, Jill McElheney at Athens Regional Medical Center
Credit: Dot Paul

Ten to fifteen years ago, after a presentation I gave at UGA about the Precautionary Principle (PP), I met Jill McElheney who introduced me to the issue regarding the Nakanishi Manufacturing Corp. In Clarke County, Nakanishi planned to expand operations, substantially increasing air emissions of the carcinogen trichloroethylene ("TCE"), threatening workers, a nearby middle school and the community. Nakanishi was seeking a permit to increase production. This permit would allow them to increase the volume of particulates that they release, including TCE. The precautionary principle advises avoiding actions that might cause harm if there's uncertainty about their effects.

"The Precautionary Principle drove our coalition with great success. When it was adhered to, we saw the life-giving results. Unfortunately, when it was not, we mourn the devastation." - Jill McElheney

LESSON LEARNED

"The campaign was successful because it was community driven. ECO-Action aided in community organizing and technical assistance."

Jill and the community expressed their desire to work together and adopted the Precautionary Principle. ECO-Action worked with the local community group they created, *Northeast Georgia Children's Environmental Health Coalition*, to organize against the expansion and demand that the company replace TCE with a safer alternative. ECO-Action is an organization that focuses on the intersection of environmental and social justice with the goal of promoting a safe and healthy environment by helping Georgia communities organize to address environmental health hazards and pollution. The Coalition eventually put the Precautionary Principle in their mission statement and proceeded to organize and educate residents about it. The campaign won a huge victory when the plant announced that it would change its process to eliminate the use of TCE and replace it with a non-toxic alternative.



Community members and environmental advocates
Credit: UGA College of Public Health



Community on an Environmental Justice Walk in Dunlop/Pittard Road Community, Athens

Principles in Action

- » **F2 - Precautionary Principle:** Apply the precautionary principle: continually assess potential harms and opportunities for risk mitigation to decide if or how a project should move forward.

LESSON LEARNED

"Professionals need to be open to community interactions and requests. I just went to give a talk and that started a relationship. Since then, Jill has been engaged in a number of campaigns that challenge the powers that be from the perspective of the Precautionary Principle."



Yomi reflecting while on an Environmental Justice Walk in Dunlop/Pittard Road Community, Athens

Incorporating the Precautionary Principle into community conversations and appropriate organizing tools were used that enabled community action. Northeast Georgia Children's Environmental Health Coalition put the Precautionary Principle in their mission statement and worked towards educating community members about these. This enabled them to shift the burden of proof from the community (e.g. proving that TCE has harmful impacts on them) to the manufacturer (e.g. proving that TCE does not have harmful impacts on the community).

The Precautionary Principle shifts this burden to the producer, requiring them to demonstrate the chemical's safety. Although the producer didn't provide proof of safety in this case, community efforts driven by the PP led to the adoption of a safer alternative solvent over a two-year period. The PP empowered the community to organize and demand change, giving them a stronger voice to influence corporate polluter decisions.

Related Resources:

- [UGA Public Health Magazine: Making Georgia Healthier](#)
- [Poisoned Profits: The Toxic Assault on Our Children by Alice & Philip Shabecoff](#)
- [Rachel's Hazardous Waste News #44](#)
- [Rachel's Hazardous Waste News #393](#)
- [Rachel's Hazardous Waste News #478](#)
- [Rachel's Hazardous Waste News #491](#)
- [Environmental Justice / Environmental Racism](#)
- [The Owl Economy](#)
- [New battlefield for petrochemical industry: benzene and childhood leukemia](#)
- [Background information for science, health, and environmental reporters](#)
- [Risk Assessments vs. Alternatives Assessments](#)