

NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL  
ASSEMBLY OF BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

2101 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D. C. 20418

COMMITTEE ON  
RISK AND DECISION MAKING

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COMMITTEE ON RISK AND DECISION MAKING

Purpose

Recently, a variety of health, safety, and environmental risks have caused widespread concern. These include the:

- accident at Three Mile Island,
- grounding of the DC 10's,
- hazards of nuclear wastes
- fierce opposition to the assault on smoking,
- dispute about air bags,
- Love Canal scandal
- sharply contested Supreme Court review of OSHA's benzene standard,
- annihilation of the snail darter,
- depletion of the ozone layer,
- threat of nuclear proliferation,
- major changes in climate caused by increasing CO<sub>2</sub> levels.

These scattered examples suggest how difficult it is for us, as individuals and as a society, to make--and agree on--decisions about health, safety, and environmental hazards. In this area of policymaking the broad uncertainties, distant ramifications, cruel tradeoffs, and labyrinthine institutional structures make choices among alternative policies especially perplexing.

A host of studies have scrutinized specific risks: the National Academy of Sciences alone has published more than a hundred risk assessments in the past decade and thousands of additional studies have been done by research institutions, business organizations, public interest groups, and such governmental agencies as the EPA, NRC, FDA, OSHA, CPSC, FAA, NIH, NHTSA, OTA, and RARG.

The National Academy of Sciences' Committee on Risk and Decision Making (CORADM) will undertake a comparative overview of this diverse array of risks and risk assessments. The Committee's synoptic inquiry clearly cannot produce detailed analyses of particular risks; its purpose, rather, will be to gain perspective, a sense of direction, and an ordering of priorities. The primary thrust of CORADM's deliberations will be to:

- adumbrate the elements of an adaptive strategy for structuring, comparing, and managing the swarm of risks we face.
- outline some guidelines for a systematic program of research to support that strategy, and
- suggest some ways to begin implementing the strategy through the development of more credible, more reliable, and more acceptable processes for constructing knowledge, communicating information, and fashioning decisions.

CORADM will meet periodically throughout calendar year 1980. Its work will be divided into three phases.

First, the Committee will make specific but preliminary recommendations to the National Science Foundation's Technology and Risk Assessment group concerning criteria for a coherent strategy for research.

Second, after surveying the field and soliciting information and viewpoints from a wide variety of sources, the Committee will make general recommendations about the assessment and management of risk.

Finally, in light of these general recommendations, the Committee will re-address and revise its specific recommendations to the National Science Foundation.

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