

Debate Overview:

1. Introduction by the Moderator: 5 mins
2. Debate: 60 mins
3. Q&A Session: Audience and Moderator: 20 mins
4. Closing remarks by the Moderator: 5 mins


Moderator: Alyssa Daku

Chief Data and Risk Executive

Canadian Food Inspection Agency

Debate Teams
Support Setting Risk Tolerances

Liane Sauer

Director General

Strategic Planning

Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission


Robert Wiersma

Manager

Public Safety Risk Management,

Technical Standards and Safety Authority

Against Setting Risk Tolerances

Greg Paoli

Principal Risk Scientist, COO,

Risk Sciences International


Pierre Bilodeau

Executive Director

Plant Health Science Directorate

Canadian Food Inspection Agency

Debate Topic: Should regulators define their risk tolerances?

Round		For (+) / Against (-)	Panelist	Time
Round 1		+	Liane Sauer	9 min presentation
	vs	-	Greg Paoli	3 min rebuttal
Advocate		+	Liane Sauer	3 min counter
				
Challenger				
Round 2		-	Greg Paoli	9 min presentation
	vs	+	Robert Wiersma	3 min rebuttal
Advocate		-	Greg Paoli	3 min counter
				
Challenger				
Round 3		+	Robert Wiersma	9 min presentation
	vs	-	Pierre Bilodeau	3 min rebuttal
Advocate		+	Robert Wiersma	3 min counter
				
Challenger				
Round 4		-	Pierre Bilodeau	9 min presentation
	vs	+	Liane Sauer	3 min rebuttal
Advocate		-	Pierre Bilodeau	3 min counter
				
Challenger				

Note: The views expressed do not reflect the views and positions of their respective organizations, and not necessarily those of the panelists. The panel discussion brings together experts in their field to engage in an entertaining dialogue on the subject of risk tolerances that is intended to be fun and provoke further thought and insights on this interesting topic.

What is risk tolerance?

What risk tolerance means to an organization will largely depend on the sector, situation, and operating environment. Notwithstanding these differences, there is a broad consensus that to effectively function and achieve an organization's objectives they must accept some level of risk, and in doing so, define what is appropriate and acceptable.

Risk tolerance attempts to draw lines in the sand, identifying the range of risk the organization is unwilling to lose or compromise in pursuit of benefits it seeks to achieve. They are expressed in both qualitative and quantitative terms, and measured by limits with upper boundaries (e.g., tolerate no more than) and lower boundaries (e.g., tolerate at a minimum or not at all). They can also be applied at the institutional level down to the sub-element levels of a specific initiative.

The benefits and challenges of setting risk tolerance

Setting risk tolerances are considered essential for government departments, agencies and private sector entities facing resource constraints. As zero risk is not achievable (practical or resource wise), without an ability to eliminate every risk, organizations must, so the argument runs, distinguish levels of risk that cannot be tolerated from those that can be. Yet, regulators with mandates to protect public health and safety have often struggled to concretely define levels of risk they would be willing to tolerate, as several reports from the Auditor General of Canada have highlighted.

Establishing a specific risk tolerance sets a benchmark against which an organization's own performance can be judged, increasing transparency and helping to make risk management more targeted and deliberate. At the same time, declaring a risk tolerance level may create legal liabilities or implicate international trade. Moreover, many public health risks are inherently dynamic and complex, and keeping risks to tolerable levels may become difficult as the internal and external risk environments evolve. Finally, admitting a level of risk is tolerable may clash with the public's perception that no risks to human health are tolerable.

Which leads us to the debate...

Sitting at the intersection of science, policy and society, this debate links scientific risk assessments with some of the perennial issues faced by regulators. Technical issues of establishing risk tolerance and managing risks to tolerable levels highlight the challenge of moving from fundamental concept to implementation, while public sensitivities highlight the issues of transparency and the public understanding of science and policy. Addressing diverse, multi-faceted and evolving risks within a fixed resource capacity underscores the issue of effective financial management which all organizations face.

Yet in light of these challenges, risk tolerances are often left vague or undefined. But should they be? Should regulators declare their tolerable levels of risk? Or are the concerns with defining risk tolerance simply too great to make defining risk tolerance worthwhile? Speaking directly to this question, the debate centers on the following motion: "Be it resolved that regulators can and must set concrete, measurable risk tolerances."

Get involved!

Please be sure to vote before and after the debate. We would love to know who you think won, and if the panelist's persuaded you to change your views on the topic!

Interested in the panelists views on a question you might have regarding risk tolerance? You're in luck. We set some time aside for you to ask the panelists directly.

We thank you for joining us today, and hope you enjoy the debate!