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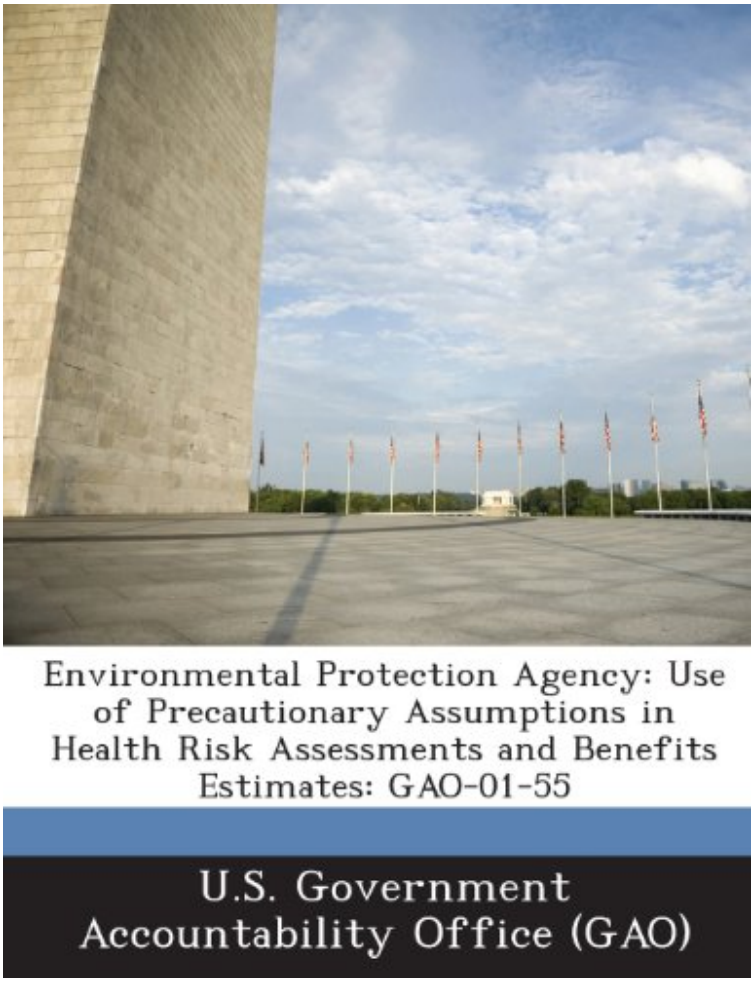

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Some of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) regulations set standards that limit environmental contaminants to levels that are determined, in large part, on the basis of the health risks they pose. When EPA assesses the health risks of contaminants, however, the agency is faced with uncertainties and gaps in scientific knowledge and data. This report summarizes GAO's findings on whether EPA's benefits estimates for major environmental regulations that establish health-based standards reflect precautionary assumptions about health risks. Three key factors influence EPA's use of precautionary assumptions in assessing health risks. First, EPA is influenced by its mission to protect human health and safeguard the natural environment. Second, EPA is influenced by the nature and extent of relevant data. Finally, EPA is influenced by the nature of the health risk being evaluated.