Rewind to 1991, when a National Cancer Institute study concluded that there was no danger in living near nuclear power plants. Now twenty years later, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is planning a follow-up study and has asked the National Academy of Sciences to begin another investigation into whether living near nuclear facilities is associated with a higher risk of cancer. The study has been commissioned just as President Obama is calling for $36 billion in federal loan guarantees for nuclear power plant construction.

However, as John Burris, chairman of the cancer-risk study committee, points out, this study will prove to be a daunting task. ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross asks, How can cancer rates in an area over a period of decades be reliably measured? Such studies are fraught with great complexities, since cancer incidences are associated with so many epidemiological variables something as simple as normal migration can confound such a study. A much better use of time and money would be to look for radiation leakage in the areas around nuclear power plant sites. My prediction is that no such leakage would be found and then this study could be scrapped.

But even if a small amount of leakage is found, Dr. Ross counters that there's enough scientific data available to support the beneficial effects of low level radiation on cancer. This study will not yield significant results, he says. Take, for instance, the Three Mile Island so-called nuclear disaster: The amount of leaked radiation was barely detectable and no one was harmed, yet the hysteria and controversy surrounding the incident was over the top. It seems as though the current study was born out of public fears of nuclear energy rather than real scientific concern.