When it came to preventing the construction of new nuclear power plants, a little hysteria went a long, long way. But now, after a 33-year hiatus, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has finally approved a new construction license for nuclear reactors. The two reactor approvals are in the state of Georgia and, upon completion in 2017, are expected to power one million homes. The reactors will be the first in the U.S. of the latest class of NRC-approved nuclear reactors, known as AP 1000. Instead of relying on electricity, the AP 1000 uses gravity and condensation to cool the reactor’s fuel rods. (Following the 2011 tsunami in Japan, it was a lack of electric power that led to the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi reactors).

But why has it taken this long to approve a new reactor? In the wake of a 1979 radiation leak at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Pennsylvania, pervasive public fears of nuclear power halted construction of new reactors in the U.S. In Europe and China, however, nuclear power burgeoned. Anti-nuclear activist groups try to scare the public with exaggerated claims about radiation leaks and subsequent health disasters. But as ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross explains, such fears are baseless. Three Mile Island is a prime example, he says. The leaked radiation in that incident was barely detectable, and no one was harmed. Yet despite the scientific evidence demonstrating the safety of nuclear energy, he notes, activist and environmental groups have successfully delayed the advancement of this reliable technology in our country. Thankfully, though, the NRC seems to finally be listening to the science, as evidenced by their latest construction approval.