The N.Y. Times has a revealing, lengthy article about the NRC that raises disturbing questions about the agency's oversight of the industry. Here are three points that are especially disturbing:

First, the NRC has weakened requirements for relicensing to the point where the process involves expensive red-tape but the result is a forgone conclusion. For instance, the agency abandoned a previous requirement that the reactor be in compliance with safety requirements at the time of the relicensing:

> With billions of dollars of revenue and investment at stake for each plant, the N.R.C. changed the rules in 1995, scrapping the requirement that operators prove they were complying with their current license. Instead, the renewal process would focus only on the aging management plan. The agency described the change as providing a "more stable and predictable regulatory process for license renewal."

Second, penalties for violation amount to a slap 0n the wrist, even for violations that could have led to serious accidents — so long as the operator was lucky enough to avoid a serious fire or leak.

Third, many of the commissioners have close ties to industry, both before and after their government service. Naturally, they're not rabidly pro-regulatory.

In return for providing tepid regulation, the NRC has a budget of $1 billion per year.

I have a proposal that would be much cheaper and allow us to spend the $1 billion on something more useful like child nutrition. The rule would simply be that each of the senior officials and top five shareholders of an operating utility and of its parent company must live with their families on the grounds of a plant, and that the plant not be allowed to operate unless the Chairman of the Board, CEO, COO, or CFO was on the premises. Their drinking water would come from the local groundwater. Neither the family nor the corporate officers would be allowed to leave the premises during an accident unless the NRC evacuated all personnel from the site. To ensure that this system operated, all of them would be required to wear bracelets with automatic shock devices.

I predict that this would be much more effective than the NRC in promoting plant safety. It would also save a billion dollars a year. If we do decide to keep the NRC,

I’d suggest a similar plan require them to stay at apartments at the oldest operating plans.

Nothing like a personal interest to stimulate a regulator’s activity!