

As the United States tries to figure out its portfolio of energy, the debate is almost always: carbon or alternative energy? Carbon is dirty! Alternatives are clean! So why does nuclear get left out? It's the elephant in the room. It's worse than a mental block—it's a fear.

A fear of nuclear bombs, terrorism and glowing waste. We see orange signs, fallout shelters, mushroom clouds and disfigured animals and people. We cower under the possibility of another Three Mile Island, Chernobyl or Hiroshima. The visions are apocalyptic and terrifying. A national poll of 800 United States residents June by the Sacred Heart University Polling Institute found that half think nuclear energy is dangerous or very dangerous. In fact, in an online survey on slate.com, "Choose Your Own Apocalypse," the top fear was loose nukes. With that kind of reputation, who wants a nuclear plant in their back yard?

And yet...of all the arguments against nuclear, many are not actually rational. The number of deaths caused by the production of carbon energy (342 per terawatt) is much higher than that for nuclear (8 per TW). You could compare it to a fear of flying. You are much more likely to die in the car on the way to the airport, than in the actual airplane. But our stomachs still drop every time the plane lifts off.

This is not to say that nuclear is the answer. That's far beyond our expertise. But if you look at the facts, it's clear that our current energy mix is not sustainable. There's a scientific consensus on that fact from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC) and every other scientific body of consequence. Evidence is mounting that we have only 5,000 days, or about 13 years, to get the concentration of atmospheric carbon below 350 parts per million. Right now it's at 375 ppm, and it's rising fast.

So what we are saying is that if we truly believe that something needs to be done to lower emissions, if we believe that we are headed down a path toward destruction, than we should do whatever it takes. That means laying everything out on the table, including nuclear, and giving each option a hard look. Renewable energy is great, but it is physically impossible to scale it up enough to meet the U.S. energy needs? We need to pick up nuclear, turn it around and look at all the sides, weigh it, test its soundness, before we put it aside. What if it could provide the missing link?

Perhaps nuclear is the completely wrong answer. But not giving it a chance would be irresponsible. At least we know then that we are making a decision based on facts and science—not just a fear of flying.