Tulane University researchers and the Louisiana Chemical Association have come to an agreement over the first steps of what they say could become the largest study ever of cancer death rates in petrochemical industry workers in Louisiana.

The researchers presented plans for the study to an LCA scientific panel on Tuesday, and they now expect to proceed with an initial examination of whether the study is feasible, said Dr. Janet Hughes, the Tulane epidemiologist heading the project.

Hughes said her negotiations with the panel, LCA’s Scientific Advisory Council, had been delayed by “miscommunication” for months, and the panel earlier appeared to oppose the study. “We think we’re at least back on track and starting the process,” Hughes said.

Ed Flynn, LCA director of health and safety affairs, said he did not know what Hughes meant by “miscommunication,” and focused instead on the agreement at the meeting. “All I know is that we had a very collegial meeting and we’re moving forward,” he said.

Flynn said the study could reveal “valuable” information, although it remains to be seen whether the study is actually feasible. He said the LCA science panel is now awaiting a detailed plan for the study and will take no stand on the matter until it sees that plan. “It’s hard to say anything because we haven’t seen the details,” Flynn said.

Nonetheless, Flynn said the plan to be submitted could provide the groundwork for a broader agreement between LCA and the Tulane researchers. “There’s a lot of room for communication, flexibility and dialogue,” he said.

If the Scientific Advisory Council is satisfied with the plan, it may recommend that LCA member companies participate in the study, but the decision to participate would remain with individual companies, Flynn said.

“The feasibility is an incredibly complicated and crucial aspect of the project,” Flynn said.

The feasibility of the project depends upon the availability of documents and data at the petrochemical plants, Hughes said.

Shesaid sheexpects the Scientific Advisory Council to approve the plan, and that she then will be able to proceed with an initial feasibility study, followed by a more extensive feasibility study. If those studies find the research can be done, the project would go ahead.

Hughes said the project would aim primarily at examining cancer death rates among workers hired prior to 1970, since workers hired that long ago would have had time to develop cancer, which can sometimes take years to become known.

The study has received $200,000 in funding from the U.S. Department of Defense to perform the feasibility study over two years, Hughes said. The DOD is interested in the study because of the military’s work with hazardous chemicals.

The National Institute of Environmental Health Studies has given about $400,000 in funding for three years to perform the actual cancer study.
CONTINUED FROM 1B research after the feasibility study is completed, Hughes said.

Over the last decade, corporations in Louisiana have studied cancer in their own employees, but never before has there been a study that encompassed a large number of plants, Flynn said.

Studying a large number of workers at many plants would have the advantage of increasing the statistical accuracy of the results, Flynn said. At the same time, the study will be complicated by differences in chemicals used and data collected at various plants, he said.