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Cobalt supply restocked: food to keep forever

by Richard Stern

Many curious students no doubt noticed the huge flat bed truck which hauled a ten ton load of cement to Building 56 Thursday morning.

This dense mass houses MIT’s new supply of Cobalt-60, which will serve as a radiation source for one of the Institute’s unique food preservation programs.

The 40,000 curie supply of Cobalt-60 came directly from Brookhaven, New York, and was loaded immediately into water. In fact, the deadly source of gamma rays will have to spend its entire five year stay at MIT under 12 feet of water for safety reasons.

MIT’s Cobalt-60 irradiator is the latest of a series of devices designed to kill the bacteria in food by use of high energy radiation. This promising development was pioneered at MIT, and using high energy electrons from the Van de Graaf generator back in 1944.

“Cold Sterilization” is the essence of the project. The food to be processed is bombarded by the gamma rays from the Cobalt-60 until all bacteria is killed. The food specimen is then hermetically sealed. Since all bacteria have been killed, and no more can get in from the outside, the food should last indefinitely.

Fur-fetiched as these schemes may seem, many are already in operation. The Food and Drug Administration recently approved MIT’s preservation operation and the Army’s Natick Labs are now canning bacon under the MIT plan. In addition, the Boston Commission of Fisheries is setting up a quarter million dollar pilot plant for radio pasteurizing for which MIT is still doing the basic research.

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