

Offers more than nuclear degree

A&M reactor used in many ways

By RUTH GRAVES
Battalion Reporter

Texas A&M's one megawatt nuclear reactor does more than enable the university to offer the only nuclear engineering degree in Texas. Since 1962, when the reactor was opened, it has been used for such functions as making radioactive implants for cancer patients and providing evidence for convicting criminals.

Ken Walker, the reactor coordinator at A&M's nuclear science center west of the campus, says that A&M has one of the four most powerful university-operated reactors in the nation.

Although the University of Michigan, the University of Missouri and MIT have similar reactors which operate at two, five and ten megawatts, A&M's one megawatt reactor has done as much or more in the more powerful reactors.

Through a process called irradiation, whereby samples are exposed to neutrons, the nuclear science center radioactivates about 10,000 samples of various materials a year, Walker said.

YEAH, IT'S KINDA HARD TO GET A DATE, BUT...



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safety mechanisms and could impose fines on the university if they found the equipment unsafe.

The reactor is equipped so that any occurrence out of the ordinary will cause the reactor to shut down automatically. This makes the reactor "student proof," Walker said. "We've never had any problem with people being exposed to radiation."

Much training is done at the nuclear science center, both in conjunction with A&M and independent of it, Walker said. Two crews for the N.S. Savannah, the first atomic-powered merchant ship, were trained at the center.

A&M offers two degrees which rely on A&M's nuclear equipment: nuclear engineering and radiation protection engineering, said Liz Nealin, one of about 60 senior nuclear engineering majors.

This type of detective work, through the combined efforts of nuclear science center director John Randall and several district attorneys, has resulted in several convictions and one acquittal, Walker said.

The reactor has also been used in tracing bullet fragments back to their name brand and tracing Indian pottery remains back to the area in which they were made, Walker said. Such distinctions can be made by comparing the radiation levels in the objects after they have been irradiated, he said.

The nuclear science center is also equipped to perform neutron radiography - a type of photography that highlights lightweight objects, Walker said. Since X-rays miss objects made from wax, paper, rubber, plastics and water, which neutron radiography highlights, the nuclear science center is able to conduct studies for several industrial firms, said director John Randall.

Walker said the personnel at the center make sure the reactor is safe. The core of the reactor is suspended in 33 feet of water, which acts as a coolant and a shield, he said. Since

particles in water can become radioactive whereas water cannot, the 100,000 gallons of water in the tank are kept pure.

Walker also said the air pressure in the building is regulated so that when doors are opened, air rushes

in - not out. If any air were contaminated, this precaution would keep it inside the building. However, radiation levels are kept "as low as reasonably achievable," he said.

Walker said that the government periodically examines the reactor's

Part of the curriculum for senior nuclear engineering students, Nealin said, is the utilization of a smaller reactor in the basement of Zachry. There the students conduct experiments and learn to operate reactors.

Sugar substitute ban is reviewed

United Press International
WASHINGTON — With Congress moving toward another review for saccharin, the Food and Drug Administration is opening the door for review of a second sugar substitute — cyclamate.

FDA Commissioner Donald Kennedy Tuesday ordered a new ban on cyclamate, which was banned a decade ago as a suspected cancer causer, saying the agency needs more information on specific health points before it can decide if a ban is warranted.

The major producer of cyclamate, Abbott Laboratories, has been urging the government for years to approve the sweetener. The prescription on FDA has become more inelastic since 1977 when saccharin — the only remaining legal sugar substitute — was implicated as a cancer causer and subjected to a proposed ban by the FDA.

Congress stalled FDA action on saccharin for 18 months, a

moratorium which expired last month. The House Commerce Committee Tuesday approved legislation that would keep saccharin legal for at least another two years.

The legislation, which still needs both House and Senate action, would prevent the FDA from banning saccharin until at least June 30, 1981.

Kennedy ordered an administrative law judge to take another look at the cyclamate question. The judge, who presided over a lengthy hearing on the subject, recommended to the FDA commissioner last October that he leave the cyclamate ban in place.

Kennedy — who leaves the FDA at the end of this month — asked the judge to provide his as-yet unnamed successor with more information on studies implicating cyclamate as a cancer causer, and to provide a close study of statistical methods used to analyze the safety of the substance.

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SATURDAY 8:45

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