ACCORDING TO AGENCY TIME STUDY

PCB Contaminant Leak Took 71 Days to Plug

By DAVID BRISCOE
Associated Press Writer

SALT LAKE CITY — After the first PCB-contaminated samples were taken in Provo, Utah, it took the government 19 days to get test results, 59 days to stop sales and 71 days to trace the source, a tentative government chronology shows.

Meanwhile, up to 290 gallons of the outlawed electrical coolant was finding its way into chickens, eggs and other food products in several states.

The 290-gallon figure came from government sources and was confirmed Friday by Pierce Packing Co., Billings, Mont., where the contamination originated.

Traces of only a few parts per million of the oily chemical are enough to render food unsafe by government standards. PCB — polychlorinated biphenyl — has caused cancerous tumors in laboratory animals, death to cattle and skin disease in humans.

The contamination began as early as June 26, more than two months before it became publicly known, according to a draft document provided The Associated Press from the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Quality Service. The document is entitled "Tentative Chronology of Events in PCB Case."

Idaho Gov. John Evans last week criticized the government for waiting so long to report the contamination to state agencies and the public. At that time the exact chronology of the testing was not known.

The PCB contamination has led to destruction of hundreds of thousands of laying hens, millions of eggs, thousands of bakery items, and tons of processed chicken meat. Other food items in Western and Midwestern states have been pulled from grocery shelves for tests.

The chronology shows it took 59 days from the time contaminated samples were taken to the time sales were first suspended at Ritewood Egg Co., Franklin.

It describes how detection of the contamination was delayed for several days because an inspector was on vacation and for days at a time as government agencies passed the information from office to office.

The chronology gives this account:

It starts July 8 when a government poultry inspector takes routine samples from chickens at Jolly Wholesale Poultry in Provo, Utah, then goes on vacation storing them in a freezer.

They are finally mailed 10 days later and arrive at a San Francisco testing laboratory four days after that.

It takes five more days, 19 from the time the samples were taken, before PCB is found.

Nine more days, and the results showing five times the allowed levels of PCB arrive at the Meat and Poultry Inspection regional office in Alameda, Calif., for further tests.

Three days later, the agency's office in Boulder, Colo., gets word of the contamination. Then, it takes the office nine days to trace the Jolly chickens to Ritewood.

The next day, a letter is sent to Ritewood and several government other agencies notifying them of the contamination.

Four days days later, the Food and Drug Administration finds the PCB in meat meal at Ritewood.

Two weeks later, more tests show unacceptable levels of contamination and Ritewood suspends sales.

A week later, 59 days after samples were taken, the firm announces it will destroy chickens. This is the first public word of the contamination.

Twelve days later, the source is traced to a leaking transformer at Pierce. The device has been in storage for nine years and contained 250 gallons of PCB when it was new. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates between 20 and 50 gallons remained when the leak was stopped.

MONS 011047