Farm Unit, Producers Hunt for Chickens Tied To Contaminated Feed

Fowl Might Have Accumulated Too-High Levels of Chemical Called PCB in Fatty Tissue

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON — The Agriculture Department and poultry producers across the South are involved in a search for chickens that might have accumulated too-high levels of a chemical in their fatty tissue as the result of eating contaminated feed.

Flocks fed the suspected feed apparently contain millions of birds, but department officials say it is still too early to determine what percentage of the total will prove unmarketable. Although it isn't known how many, if any, of the affected chickens may have been sold to consumers, Agriculture Department tests so far haven't turned up evidence of such sales.

The chemical in question, polychlorinated biphenyls, usually called PCB, behaves similarly to the pesticide DDT. Because it requires years to break down to its harmless components, it can build up in the tissues of birds and other animals that might consume it. Recent studies have shown it to be fairly prevalent in the environment because of its widespread use in the manufacture of plastics and in other industrial processes.

Zero PCB Is Required

Food and Drug Administration regulations require commercial animal feeds to register zero PCB. The agency hasn't any legal tolerance for PCB in animals marketed for human consumption, but under its enforcement "guidelines," it doesn't take any action unless levels in edible tissue or separable fat exceed five parts of PCB per million.

FDA tests of the contaminated feed component, fish meal, which originated from a Wilmington, N.C., plant, showed that the meal contained 15 to 20 parts per million of PCB and an agency official said that the leak is believed to have continued over a 10-week period that began April 30, affecting 16,000 tons of the product. At the normal blending level of 2% fish meal, the mishap is estimated to have produced some 880,000 tons of contaminated feed.

The Wilmington plant is owned by East Coast Terminal Inc., a subsidiary of South Pacific Proteins Inc., Darien, Conn. Wallace E. Pratt, the office manager for South Pacific, referred all questions to the company's New York attorney, James Higgins, but Mr. Higgins said he wasn't well enough informed about the company's affairs to provide any information.

Traced to Fish Meal

The Agriculture Department said the presence of PCB in chicken feed came to its attention after a large North Carolina poultry producer discovered that "the hatchability in its breeder flocks was sharply reduced." The company, through chemical analysis, traced its difficulty to the fish meal supplied by East Coast Terminal. A government inspection of the plant showed that a heating system used to sterilize the meal against salmonella was leaking heat-exchange fluid containing PCB "directly into the [illegible]"

The company issued a recall notice to some 64 customers in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Delaware, Indiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, Virginia and Mississippi on July 14 and "voluntarily" closed down on July 16, officials said.

The FDA official said some contaminated meal has been returned by customers, but the amount recovered is expected to be relatively small. "This stuff (the meal) is used awfully, awfully fast," he commented.

Some of the fish meal purchasers use the product in feed fed to their own poultry, but others mix it into feed sold in commercial channels that may have gone to hundreds of end-users.

The Agriculture Department and private laboratories currently are testing the carcasses of hundreds of birds chosen from suspected flocks to determine whether PCB has accumulated in their tissue. Poultry found to be unfit for human consumption will be "destroyed" prior to slaughter, the department stated.

Fred J. Fullerton, an official in the department's Consumer and Marketing Service, said the prime concern is over hens used for egg production and marketed as mature birds after their egg productivity declines.

"Because they are older at time of slaughter, mature birds could accumulate more PCB in their tissues" than younger birds sold for their meat, Mr. Fullerton said.

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A search for unmarketable chickens is being conducted across the South, in an effort to locate fowl with too-high levels of a chemical in their fatty tissue as the result of eating contaminated feed. The chemical in question, known as PCB, behaves similarly to the pesticide DDT. Agriculture Department tests haven't shown evidence of any affected birds being sold to consumers.

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