Midwest Turkeys, Salmon Are Contaminated by PCBs

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The nation's largest meat packing firm has discovered that about 50,000 turkeys destined for processing at one of its plants have been heavily contaminated by a persistent, highly toxic industrial chemical compound.

It is the third time this year that an accidental "spill" of the compound, polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs, has forced removal from the market of large numbers of chickens or turkeys before the food products reached wholesale or retail dealers.

Other Species Tested

In a related development, Gov. William G. Milliken of Michigan abruptly has ordered the suspension of a program of free distribution of thousands of the state's famed Coho salmon to fisherman. Milliken's action came after officials found inordinately high levels of PCBs in the fish.

Last year, 30,000 Coho salmon from Lake Michigan were given away after they had spawned. After Milliken halted this year's distribution, scheduled to start yesterday, aides to the governor said other species of fish also were being tested for PCB contamination.

The effect of PCBs on humans has not been tested. In laboratory tests on rats, PCB contamination has caused liver damage and birth defects.

Found by Processor

The most recent batch of tainted turkeys was discovered by employes of the Swift Dairy & Poultry Co. plant at Detroit Lakes, Minn., a large poultry processor which maintains an extensive voluntary testing program to guard against contamination.

Officials at that firm, a subsidiary of Swift & Co., the country's biggest meat packer, notified Agriculture Department representatives on Aug. 8 that they had found concentrations of PCBs ranging from 100 to 300 parts per million in the turkey fat.

In addition, the Swift tests showed that concentrations of PCBs in the turkeys' edible tissue ranged from approximately 10 to 35 parts per million.

Voluntarily Detained

The federal government's "action level" for PCBs — the point at which such food products must be removed from the market — is 5 parts per million.

Swift voluntarily detained the seven flocks of turkeys, about 50,000 fowl.

But it was not until Sept. 13 — more than a month after federal officials were notified of the potentially serious health hazard — that the Agriculture Department initiated a three-state monitoring and screening program to insure that other turkeys were not similarly affected.

The only Agriculture Department notice to the public about the problem was a brief, vaguely worded press release distributed late last Friday afternoon. It said the department was "trying to pinpoint the source of contamination by PCBs in a

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few lots of turkeys and possibly some other poultry products in the Midwest."

That announcement did not disclose that a substantial number of turkeys was being withheld from the market and it did not identify the grower or processor involved. It said only that tissue samples from fowl "produced by a turkey grower in Minnesota revealed PCB residues" higher than the authorized levels.

The press release did say that the Agriculture Department had started checking for PCBs in "all poultry slaughtered in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota," and that intensified testing for PCBs had been initiated in 17 egg-producing plants in those three states and nearby areas of northeast Nebraska and northwest Iowa.

Agriculture Department officials yesterday repeatedly refused to provide any additional information.

George R. Grange, deputy administrator of the department's consumer and marketing service, said he was "acting in the best interests of consumers" in not identifying the firms involved "because the situation now is under control."

But Grange—as well as all other officials questioned at both the Agriculture Department and Food and Drug Administration—acknowledged that they still have been unable to find the source of the PCBs which contaminated the turkeys.

The turkeys were grown by the Peterson-Biddick Co. of Wadena, Minn., but federal inspectors could find no trace of the industrial chemical at that farm.

They then turned their attention to the Farmers Rendering & Dead Animal Service, in Fergus Falls, Minn. An initial round of tests indicated that the products of that firm, some which went into the feed used by the Peterson-Biddick Co., contained a high level of PCBs.

But a spokesman for the rendering plant's parent company, Central By-Products Co. of Redwood Falls, Minn., said federal officials had acknowledged that they apparently misread their test data. A "clerical error" resulted in a "misplaced decimal point," he said.

No Longer Suspected

Government officials confirmed yesterday that the rendering plant is no longer suspected as the source of the PCBs, which are widely used as insulating fluids and in cooling and heating systems.

Although no other contaminated products have been found as a result of the Midwest "spill," the source of the leak remains unidentified, federal officials said.

The first major case of PCB contamination in fowl this year occured in January, when 140,000 laying hens were slaughtered and buried in Upstate New York after federal and state inspectors discovered that bakery products used in poultry feed contained high levels of PCBs.

In July, a North Carolina firm, the nation's largest poultry producer, slaughtered 80,000 broiler chickens, buried them 6 feet underground and covered them with lime, after learning that fish meal used in its feed was tainted by PCBs.

Earlier Leak Traced

That leak of PCBs, traced back to a dripping piece of equipment in the plant of a North Carolina fish meal producer, led to the government seizure or voluntary recall of 75,000 eggs, 100,000 pounds of frozen egg products, 245,000 pounds of commercial fish feed and 40 tons of rendered meat meal.

In this week's Michigan announcement, the governor's office said tests of approximately 100 Coho salmon near the communities of Ludington and Manistee showed a PCB level of 11 parts per million, slightly more than twice the acceptable federal level.

Aides to Milliken said the contamination problem could have serious implications for Michigan's whole Coho program, and possibly for other sport and commercial fishing activities.

Since their introduction into Michigan waters from the West Coast in the mid-1960s, Coho salmon have become a major attraction for the state's sport fishermen. They have produced a significant economic boom in many parts of the state.

The extent of their popularity is indicated by the fact that the state last spring released, for seeding purposes, 7.5 million young Coho and Chinook salmon into open streams and the waters of Lakes Michigan, Superior and Huron.

Milliken's office took no action to curtail sport fishing for salmon, and there is no commercial salmon fishing in Lake Michigan. A task force headed by the governor's principal environmental assistant will consider future ramifications involving PCBs in the fish.

PCBs are produced in this country by only one firm, the Monsanto Co., of St. Louis. A company spokesman, E. V. Johit, said yesterday that Monsanto three years ago had initiated a program to "get to and control the uses and escape of PCBs." He said the program had been "successful, to a very great degree."

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