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Chickens Are Destroyed Because Meal Is Polluted

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says that thousands of chickens have been destroyed and many more may be because a Ralston Purina Co. subsidiary distributed contaminated animal meal last year.

The feed was contaminated by polychlorinated biphenyls during a warehouse fire in Puerto Rico in early February 1977. It is believed that the fire caused pressure sensitive valves in two electrical transformers to leak PCB coolant into the leased building. The feed was stored in bags in the warehouse.

Ralston Purina, in a statement released Wednesday, said that "an isolated amount of contaminated fishmeal had been inadvertently shipped in June and July, 1977," from the Puerto Rico subsidiary to several feed distributors.

The fishmeal, an ingredient used in animal and poultry feeds, has all been destroyed or withdrawn from the market, Ralson said. None of the fishmeal was used in Purina Chow animal feeds, the company added.

A spokesmen for the PDA, however, said it was not clear whether any of the contaminated fishmeal was mixed in swine or other animal feeds. Nancy Glick of the FDA also said she did not know if any pet food was involved.

Ralston said that as soon as it became aware of the PCB contamination in early February, 1978, it voluntarily notified the FDA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture and began procedures to locate and dispose of the affected fishmeal. "Corrective measures were immediately taken to alleviate any potential problems and all affected customers have been contacted.

The customers were served by feed brokers and distributors primarily in Texas, Arkansas and Iowa. Isolated shipments were also made to southwestern Missouri, California, Mississippi, Alabama, eastern Oklahoma, Minnesota and Idaho.

"We don't know how many chickens or eggs were sold before it was discovered", she said. "We know several hundred thousand chickens containing excessive PCB levels have had to be destroyed and eggs from contaminated laying hens are being destroyed daily."

Polychlorinated biphrenyls are highly stable chemicals that were used extensively for many years in insulators and other electrical equipment. As a result of their heavy industrial use they have become persistent environment contaminants that get into the food chain and turn up in the fat tissues of many animals, especially fish.

Consumption of large doses by humans can cause acne-like skin eruptions, darkening of the skin and nails, excessive discharge from the eyes and swelling of the eyelids, the FDA spokeswoman said. But such symptoms should not be experienced by people who have consumed the contaminants in the quantities found in poultry and eggs so far, she added.