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IDAHO GOVERNOR URGES IMPROVED RESPONSES TO FOOD CONTAMINATION EPISODES

Federal regulators should designate a "lead agency" in any food contamination outbreak threatening the public, Idaho Gov. John V. Evans recommended to the Congress at a hearing dealing with the polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contamination incident spreading through the Western States (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, Oct. 1, Page 67).

"A 'lead' agency should be established to assume the responsibility of any outbreak threatening to the public, and an individual designated within that agency to adequately respond to inquiries from the public, other agencies, the media, and others involved," Evans said. "It is logical to assume the agency having the greatest interest involved because of particular expertise would act as the lead agency and assume the responsibilities of coordination and dissemination of information."

Evans said his office and other Idaho state agencies "were badly served" by the Department of Agriculture and Food and Drug Administration in the PCB contamination incident, which began at a Billings, Mont., meat packing plant that shipped animal meat meal to Ritewood Farms, an egg producer at Farmwood, Ida., and spread through 19 States and several foreign countries.

It appeared that scheduling problems would prevent a resumption of the PCB hearing for "about a month," subcommittee sources told FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS. Chairman Eckhardt (D-Tex.) of the Commerce Committee's Oversight and Investigations subcommittee is expected to call for testimony from the Environmental Protection Agency, the General Electric Co., and the Monsanto Co. It was learned. General Electric made the transformer which leaked PCBs at the Pierce Packing Co. plant, although it was purchased second-hand.

The Idaho governor made a series of recommendations at the hearing, including:

- (1) "A fundamental purpose of all government agencies is to promote the common good of all individuals within their areas of responsibility ... It is essential that all agencies give high priority to human health concerns. An attempt needs to be made to confirm that activities of each governmental agency are primarily directed towards maintaining human health.

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- (2) "An effort needs to be made to clarify the responsibilities and authorities of federal, state, and local agencies ... The current capabilities of each agency to conduct appropriate field investigations and laboratory determinations need further clarification.
- (3) "The USDA and FDA should automatically notify the State health officer and director (of the State) Department of Agriculture whenever their analyses show (a) contamination of animal feed or food for human consumption, or (b) the presence of animal disease that may be transmitted directly to humans or indirectly into the human food supply.
- (4) "A news release needs to be prepared at the earliest opportunity to minimize media sensationalism. ... An attempt should be made to identify human risks involved, and to quantify the risk in terms that are easily understandable by the public.
- (5) "The USDA should develop an indemnity program for livestock and poultry producers who suffer extreme economic losses when their products are quarantined based on confirmed laboratory data that indicate hazardous levels of toxic materials. ... This program might increase the cooperation of producers to participate in recalls of food that may produce adverse health effects.
- (6) "Improved communications among health and agricultural officials in neighboring States would aid in the investigation and assessment of incidents like the recent PCB problem...
- (7) "A nationwide clearinghouse for information on PCBs could be established to aid (State) officials in managing PCB problems ...
- (8) "An attempt should be made to develop the technical capability to get laboratory analyses completed in the shortest possible time after the samples are collected. Duplication of laboratory support can be minimized if each agency accepts responsibility for various types of samples ... Interlaboratory quality control needs to be established and documented by exchange of split samples.
- (9) "Public information designed to educate the public on the significance of PCBs in the environment could be developed to inform the public of the sources of PCBs and ways to minimize the effects that PCBs have on human health ...
- (10) "An attempt should be made to identify and properly dispose of all surplus PCB material ...
- (11) "The USDA meat inspection activity should be evaluated to see if a more efficient means of detecting unsafe or adulterated meats could be developed using existing resources.
- (12) "The establishment of tolerances by federal regulatory agencies appears to be somewhat arbitrary ... Tolerances of some chemicals seem to be shifted downward as analytical techniques have improved. We suggest that the current concepts of 'zero tolerance' and 'avoidable' versus 'unavoidable' tolerances be re-evaluated in terms of the differential capabilities of various laboratories.
- (13) "The distribution of contaminated feed can be traced most efficiently by analysis of production and distribution records of feed producers and distributors. For this reason, feed producers and distributors should be encouraged to keep accurate records."

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In a colloquy between Gov. Evans and Eckhardt, the problem of quarantining possibly contaminated food was explored.

Evans said his authority as governor might permit him to declare a state of emergency, but "until the (contamination) is proven to the satisfaction of the authorities, we have some difficulties."

Eckhardt said it was his understanding that federal regulators can't move decisively until they have a positive determination of risk, "but there ought to be a step short of that."

FDA HEADQUARTERS LAB DISCHARGES INTO AIR ATTACKED

The Food and Drug Administration's laboratories at its downtown Washington FOB-8 headquarters building came under attack last month for an unexpected reason -- the charge that the laboratories, located only a step away from Capitol Hill, were emitting poisonous chemicals into the air.

FDA-ers have acknowledged for years that the laboratories had structural deficiencies and have made plans to move the laboratory facilities to a new Beltsville location.

Funding for the planned laboratory is currently one of the unresolved issues delaying agreement between the House and Senate on appropriations for the agency and for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, Oct. 1, Page 66).

However, FDA-ers insist that the discharge of chemicals into the air from the current laboratories is carefully controlled, and that the figure of 38 pounds per day, which is within the District of Columbia's safety limit of 40 pounds per day, is probably a gross over-estimate of the actual amount of chemicals released.

The agency is in the process of contracting for a check on actual emissions from the laboratories and expects to have firm figures in a few months. The check was planned as part of the preparation of an environmental impact statement required for the planned Beltsville facility, Frank B. Claunts, Director of FDA's Division of Management Services, noted.

It was Claunts' appearance before a subcommittee of the House Public Works and Transportation Committee that set off the mini-flurry of publicity on FDA's laboratories, headlined in one paper as "FDA lab on Capitol Hill spews poisonous chemicals into air."

Claunts appeared with representatives of the General Services Administration, the government housekeeping agency, before the subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds chaired by Rep. Levitas (D-Ga.). FDA has asked \$8.4 million to repair the ducts and fume hoods at the FOB-8 building.

Levitas expressed alarm at hearing that the laboratory releases toxic and cancer-causing chemicals into the air, saying he was "shocked to find out that the federal government is consciously polluting downtown Washington," and commenting that