PCB:

Probers Find Contamination of Food, Animal Feed in 17 States

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal officials say PCB contamination of food and animal feed, confirmed so far in 17 states, poses no immediate health threat to the public.

But in a less reassuring assessment, a top Agriculture Department official says future contaminations by the suspected cancer-causing agent or other toxic chemicals could go "entirely undetected."

"... PCBs are toxic and may possibly cause serious long-term health problems," Sherwin Gardner, acting administrator of the Food and Drug Administration, told a House subcommittee hearing Friday.

"However, it is our best judgment that the short-term nature of this incident and the levels of contamination found so far pose no immediate threat to the health of consumers in the affected states."

Gardner told the panel he is "reasonably certain" no supermarket shelves contain food contaminated with PCB. And Carol Tucker Foreman, Assistant Agriculture Secretary, offered asssurances that there are no contaminated chickens in stores.

But she also had a warning:

"It is entirely possible that an occurrence such as the recent PCB incident could go undetected by our monitoring system for a long period if time. It is also possible that a single incident of this size could go entirely undetected," she said.

"We were lucky in picking up this single incident relatively quickly," she told the oversight and investigations subcommittee of the House commerce committee.

Ms. Foreman said federal inspectors have kept about 300,000 pounds of poultry away from consumers because of suspected contamination. In addition, she said officials have identified over 70,000 pounds of contaminated egg products, of which nearly one-third "have been incorporated into other food products" such as cake mixes.

Officials have traced the PCB — polychlorinated biphenyl — to a transformer at a meat packing plant in Billings, Mont., Pierce Packing Co.

PCB is a toxic substance that produces skin diseases in humans and is a suspected cancer-causing agent. Its manufacture has been banned by the federal government, but the substance is still in widespread use as a coolant and lubricant in electrical transformers.

Officials say about 200 gallons of PCB leaked into the packing plant's waste water system, which is dredged for inedible by-products to be used in meat meal, an ingredient in animal feed.

Fred Pierce II, the company's board chairman, told the subcommittee, "Nobody was ever aware that PCBs were even around us."

The transformers at his facility that contain PCB have no markings to that effect, he said, and neither the manufacturer of the equipment nor a consulting firm that recently conducted an inspection indicated there was any potential hazard.

The contamination was first discovered in spent laying hens shipped from Idaho to Utah.

Since the packing plant was confirmed as the source of the PCB earlier this month, officials have found contaminated animal feed and food in these 17 states:

Montana, Utah, Idaho, Washington, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Oregon, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, Kansas, South Dakota, Colorado and Illinois.

Pierce Issues Apology

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The company responsible for chemical contamination that has spread to at least 17 states issued an apology Friday and said its operations have returned to normal.

Ken Poggi, president of the Pierce Packing Co., said in a written statement that all tests of the company's slaughter hogs have shown no sign of the toxic chemical PCB — polychlorinated biphenyl — which contaminated the firm's animal meal by-products this summer.

Four egg producers in Montana, Idaho and Utah have destroyed eggs and chickens that were produced with contaminated feed.

"Pierce Packing Co. deeply regrets that our most unfortunate accident has caused such widespread havoc in the animal feed, poultry, egg and livestock industries," said Poggi in the statement released by company spokesman Darrell Peterson. "Our heartfelt sympathy extends to all [illegible] with us."

The statement made no mention of any plan to reimburse producers for the losses they suffered in destroying product or withholding them from the market, or for the value of contaminated feed remaining on hand.

"We really haven't sat down to determine that," said Peterson. "We're more concerned with getting things cleaned up and doing as much as we can to help everybody."

Peterson said intense government testing of the plant's produce has created a backlog in the hog-slaughter operation. The firm told Montana hog producers to contact company representatives for appointments in order to sell hogs to Pierce.

The spokesman said production of animal meal — the product that was contaminated — is again approaching the normal level of 96,000 pounds per week. But he said no meal has been sold since the plant reopened on Sept. 17 and the meal will be withheld until test results are in.

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But she also had a warning.

It is entirely possible that an occurrence such as the recent PCB incident could go undetected by our monitoring system for a long period of time. It is also possible that a single incident of this sort could go undetected altogether.

We were lucky in picking up this single incident relatively quickly, she told the oversight and investigations subcommittee of the house commerce committee.

Ms. Foreman said federal inspectors have kept about 300,000 pounds of poultry away from consumers because of suspected contamination and often she said officials have identified more than 2 million pounds of contaminated egg products, of which meats and feed have been incorporated into other food products such as cake mixes.

Officials have traced the PCB — polychlorinated biphenyls — to a transformer at a meat packing plant in Rouge, Mich., Pierce Packing Co.

PCB is a toxic substance that produces skin diseases in humans and is a suspected cancer-causing agent. Its manufacture has been banned by the federal government by the chemical is still in widespread use as a coolant and lubricant in electrical transformers.

Officials say about 200 gallons of PCB leaked into the packing plant's waste water system, which is designed for inedible by-products to be used in meat meal, an ingredient in animal feed.

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