

Federal meat inspector Richard Lambie approves hog carcass at a Boise meat packing plant

PCBs . . . No related sickness reported

By LONNIE ROSENWALD
The Idaho Statesman

Most Idahoans were more concerned than alarmed, more confused than panicky, when they were told a week and a half ago their food was contaminated with lethal PCBs.

For 2 weeks PCBs, a synthetic oil ingredient banned from use in 1975, turned breakfast into a game of chance, as rumors on contamination moved from chicken to eggs to bacon.

Millions of eggs containing more PCBs than are allowed by law were sold in Idaho and other states during July and August, before food inspectors detected the chemical in chickens in a random test performed at a Provo, Utah, slaughterhouse.

In the space of a few days, more than 300,000 chickens and hundreds of thousands of eggs were destroyed. It seemed Bonanza returned eggs to supermarkets, an egg sale resolved. For several days a Twin Falls meat packing plant was quarantined while inspectors checked its pork.

The U. S. Food and Drug Administration is unsure of the implications, if any, of the current exposure, according to an FDA chemical specialist who is busy preparing an in-house report on health effects of the Idaho contamination.

"This dosage falls in a grey area — and it's a very large grey area — between what is known to be safe and what is known to be unsafe," said the chemist, who asked to remain anonymous.

"Certainly it's safe in the short term. In the long term? I can't guarantee for a lifetime."

PCBs were widely used as coolant oils from the time they were first manufactured in the 1920s until 1976, when Congress authorized the Environmental Protection Agency to ban their use. The substance is not toxic, meaning it collects in an organism over a period of years without breaking down. Although people who work with PCBs and breathe them, most PCB related illness has been caused by PCB buildup.)

Months after the poultry contamination began, no one has reported sickness from eating PCBs, a group of synthetic chlorine compounds widely used in electrical transformers, capacitors, air conditioners, TV sets and paints — allowed in food and animal feed.

In order to gauge long-term effects, health officials tested PCB levels in blood of residents of the small southeast Idaho community of Franklin, home of the farm whose chickens first showed PCBs in the Provo inspection, and in employees of the Pierce Packing Co., where PCB leaked from a ruptured electrical transformer into feed sometime in June, beginning the PCB chain of events.

Idaho's Chief Health Officer Ed Gallagher assured the public one would have to eat 3 to 4 dozen PCB-contaminated eggs a day to get sick.

The FDA chemical specialist said 90 eggs a day would equal the exposure which caused behavioral defects in offspring of laboratory monkeys.

But these assurances were little more than speculation. Despite a decade of research, little is known about PCBs, the FDA chemist said.

"We don't know if it's a care-nogen. We don't know whether it has reproductive effects on humans," he admitted.

"It's a numbers game," said Raymond Locke, a chemist in the FDA's Toxicology Division in Washington.

Environmental Defense Fund attorney Jacqueline Warren thinks health officials are understating the danger of PCBs.

"This is a toxic substance which has been linked with cancer, birth defects, nervous disorders, tumors and skin disease," said Warren, whose Washington based group led efforts to end the United States of PCBs.

In 1977 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration set levels for the amount of the chemical allowed in food. The agency became concerned about PCBs after a poisoning incident in 1936 in Japan, in which people who ate Yushow rice oil containing 2,500 parts per million of PCBs developed skin lesions.

FDA regulations are based on the following data:

- In 1936 skin lesions and nervous disorders were documented in workers who inhaled PCBs.
- In 1973-74 Michigan fisherman who consumed fish containing 1020 parts per million of PCBs showed no symptoms of illness.
- Laboratory animals have developed genetic problems, tumors, tiredness and possibly cancer from PCBs. Over a 2-year period of PCB intake behavioral problems developed in infant monkeys.

In clamping down on PCBs, the FDA also had to consider the minimum amount tests were able to detect. The agency also evaluated the cost to the food industry of complying with regulations.

Feed and egg levels are set at the minimum detectable levels. Poultry limits, above the detection level, are based on the feed level: chickens given feed with PCBs are expected to show roughly 3 times the feed level.

Levels found in the Franklin chickens and eggs were as much as 20 times above legal levels.

The contamination led many to wonder whether such accidents could happen again. The EDF claims there are still 750 million pounds of PCBs contained in 1 million electrical transformers, as well as capacitors, mining equipment and other machinery.

There are no PCBs present in what we eat every day, the FDA says. In 1972 it reported the average American consumed 40 parts per million a day. In 1975, tests found traces of PCBs in 39 percent of all meat, poultry and fish products.

Voluntary 'fat meat inspection

By DON KENDALL

WASHINGTON (AP) — A proposal for overhauling federal inspection of processed meat and poultry items by relying heavily on voluntary information kept on file by the companies may be a major step toward making much larger changes in the nation's basic inspection program.

One of the biggest advances in the inspection of meat and poultry at slaughtering plants came a dozen years ago with new laws that required all of the plants to meet standards "at least equal" to federal requirements.

According to Agriculture Department officials, however, the basic structure of meat inspection has changed little since the department assumed the responsibility in 1906.

Technology affecting the production, slaughter and inspection of red meat and poultry have advanced tremendously, but USDA officials say many of the procedures and rules affecting the details of inspection are archaic.

For example, they say, cattle are still supposed to be checked for diseases that were prevalent more than 70 years ago. Some, such as tuberculosis, still exist but not in the degree they did at the turn of the century.

Modern feedlot operations turn out fattened cattle in much shorter periods of time, using grain and forage-based rations that were not recognized 70 years ago.

Pens of slaughter steers that go to packing houses are similar in grades and weights. The same can be said about broiler flocks and hogs.

Thus, although it would require legislation in Congress, some USDA officials say they think that it is time to alter the rules that now require inspectors to examine each carcass before it is approved for the consumer market.

The idea of inspection by entire "lots" of livestock is not new, nor will it be popularly acclaimed if USDA moves toward this system. Consumer groups and others will have their say before anything becomes final.

But the recent announcement of USDA's proposal for a "voluntary" involvement by meat and poultry processors in the inspection of products like hot dogs, frozen pizzas chicken soup and similar items is an indication of what some federal officials see as answer to the cumbersome and costly problem of inspecting meat and poultry.

About 7,000 meat and poultry plants are federally inspected, and roughly 8,000 of these also manufacture processed items.

The proposals apply only to the processing side of the plants, with federal inspectors still required to be present at slaughtering operations.

Basically, plants that voluntarily operate a USDA-sponsored quality control program would keep detailed records of their operations so that fewer federal inspectors would be needed to monitor their operations.

Assistant Secretary Carol Tucker Foreman, who announced the proposal for voluntary quality control, said the overall inspection program currently involves about 9,300 inspectors and costs $257 million a year, compared to 5,644 inspectors and a cost of $91 million a decade ago.

"By 1985, there is a potential for the system to utilize 13,500 inspectors and cost $534 million," Foreman said. "There is no need to have this happen. The public can have efficient as well as effective inspection. That must be our goal."

If the proposal is adopted and the results are favorable, the USDA will look at the possibility of asking Congress to make the quality control program mandatory, she said.

Meanwhile, USDA said in the official proposal that the voluntary quality control system raises questions about whether the "quality of inspection would be reduced" and whether it would mean "an abdication" of responsibilities under existing federal meat and poultry inspection laws.

"With respect to the first concern, the department has good reason to believe that the quality of inspection would not be diminished, but could even be enhanced," the proposal statement said.

For some years, it said, USDA's inspection program "has had experience ... in utilizing sampling and inspection techniques based on objective measurements and procedures."

Procedures for inspection studies best for determining if residues from other chemicals such a hair and bone particles is a good example, the statement said.

"In this procedure, the department's inspector randomly selects a prescribed sample size (based on the total quantity of product to be shipped (normally referred to as a lot), and carefully examines that sample for specific defects," it said.

Foreman said one benefit of the revised programs would be the release of a substantial number of inspectors from processing plants so they can concentrate on more urgent duties, including the problem of chemical residues that continue to show up in meat and poultry, examination of imported products and a closer inspection of "problem" plants.

Although Foreman said a number of large processors, the National Broiler Council, the National Turkey Federation and some others have supported the concept of voluntary quality control, a number of processors, consumer groups and others have voiced opposition to the proposal.

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