Maine Chickens Contaminated by Chemical in Feed

By Victor Cohn
Washington Post Staff Writer

Two hundred thousand Maine chickens are being withheld from sale in what is apparently the largest case yet of food contamination with the DDT-like chemical PCB.

In the fourth major incident since last year of a potential human health problem that few persons knew existed until then, the chickens consumed the PCB in feed from one or more Maine mills owned until a few weeks ago by the Ralston-Purina Co.

Puzzled federal officials were still trying yesterday to learn the source of the feed contamination—and why major measures taken last year to prevent such accidents failed.

Food and Drug Administration officials said they have been unable to find a source of contamination at the main plant involved, a combined feed mill and poultry production plant at Thorndike, Maine. Most of the feed apparently was produced there in late January.

By coincidence, Ralston-Purina has just sold this plant and two others the FDA believes are involved at Fort Halifax and Penobscot, Maine. "But the company's people are still cooperating in the investigation," said James G. Gesling of the FDA's bureau of veterinary medicine.

The tainted and suspect chickens are being held at two plants, the Penobscot Poultry Co., Belfast, Maine, and the Fort Halifax Poultry Co., Waterville, Maine.

Tests were started after these producers reported that some of their young chickens were dying.

Some of the chickens tested have shown PCB contamination in fat up to 172 parts per

The Agriculture Department and the FDA are checking Maine and nearby state poultry fims, slaughtering plants and food markets for any further contamination.

Agriculture's Dr. William Lecce said, "As far as we can see, we have all the birds suspected of being involved." Other officials said they could not be sure yet that some birds did not reach consumers.

PCBs—they are actually a large class of industrial chemicals called polychlorinated biphenyls—are colorless, odorless liquids long used as electrical insulating fluids, heat-transfer fluids and ingredients of inks, paints, lubricants and plastics.

In 1968 a major PCB tragedy affected 1,000 Japanese, producing both stillborn and deformed children and other damage. The cause was poisoned rice oil containing 2,000 to 3,000 parts per million of a PCB which had leaked into the oil from a heating pipe.

PCBs have been found since in human hair and fat and in the tissues of birds, fish and other animals in much of the world.

Like DDT, they will remain there for decades, for they are even more persistent in defying chemical breakdown.

Last year PCB contamination forced destruction of 165,000 chickens and eggs in North Carolina, 100,000 chickens in [illegible] and 50,000 turkeys in Minnesota.

Since then, said Gesling, food plants all over the country have been checked to try to eliminate machinery with PCB fluids.

Monsanto Chemical Co., sole U.S. producer, is now selling PCBs only for closed-system electrical insulation. But large amounts are still being made and sold in other countries.

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