

PCBs spread to feed, food in 17 states

WASHINGTON (AP) — PCB, a toxic chemical suspected of causing cancer, has turned up in animal feed and food in 17 states from Oregon on the West Coast to New Jersey in the East, Agriculture Department officials said Friday.

"We have now located and detained approximately 300,000 pounds of poultry and 16,000 pounds of fresh pork," Assistant Agriculture Secretary Carol Tucker Foreman said during a congressional hearing.

She said officials had found more than 73,000 pounds of contaminated egg products, nearly one-third of which has been "incorporated into other food products."

Despite the spread of PCB contamination, traced to a single packing plant in Billings, Mont., Foreman and the acting commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration said people faced no immediate health threat.

"PCBs are toxic and may possibly cause serious long-term health problems," Sherman Gardner of the FDA told the oversight and investigations

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subcommittee of the House Commerce Committee.

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

Subcommittee members were skeptical, however.

"How can you say there is no major health hazard when people all over the country don't know if they can go into the supermarket and buy safe chickens and eggs?" asked Rep. Andrew Maguire, D-N.J.

Foreman said she was certain that there were no contaminated chickens in stores. Gardner said he was "reasonably" certain that there were no contaminated food products containing eggs, such as cake mixes. It would be another 30 days before he could be certain, he said.

Subcommittee officials and Idaho Gov. John Evans also were critical of the Agriculture Department's handling of the contaminated products — as Foreman has been in the past.

It took the government 19 days to obtain test results after samples were taken from contaminated poultry, 30 days to stop sales and 71 days to trace the source of the PCBs.

Meanwhile, the FDA also announced that it had conducted a grocery-store survey in 24 western and Midwestern cities that a spokesman said was "very reassuring in terms of PCB contamination."

FDA spokesman Wayne Pines said agency inspectors checked eggs, chicken, pork, egg noodles and mayonnaise at 48 retail stores. He said trace levels of PCB were found only in 8 samples of eggs.

The manufacture of PCBs, polychlorinated biphenyls, has been banned by the government. But the toxic chemical still is widely used in electrical transformers and other equipment as a coolant and lubricant.

Federal officials said the source of the current contamination was a leaking transformer in a storage shed at the Pierce Packing Co. in Billings. Officials said they believed about 200 gallons of the PCB leaked

into the plant's wastewater system, which is dredged for mobile byproducts to be used in meat meal, an ingredient in animal feed.

Fred C. Pierce II, board chairman of the packing company, told the subcommittee, "We are sorry for our involvement in this accident." He said, "The first word of PCB leakage at our plant came from federal inspectors."

Agriculture Department officials provided this list of states where PCB contamination has been found: Montana, Utah, Idaho, Washington, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Oregon, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, Kansas, South Dakota, Colorado and Illinois.

Other officials said the toxic chemical had turned up in poultry grease shipped to Canada and Japan. The grease is used in the manufacture of soap.

Donald Houston, head of the Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Quality Service, said officials were continuing to test cows, hogs, and other animals slaughtered for human consumption for PCB contamination.

So far, he said, there have been no tests indicating contamination in beef.

The 16,000 pounds of pork ordered withheld from the marketplace came from 300 hogs slaughtered in Idaho after being fed feed known to have been contaminated with PCB, Houston said. He said officials are awaiting test results on the pork itself.

Abnormalities found in PCB-hit insects

LOGAN, Utah (UPI) — PCB was isolated in brown pelicans, bald eagle eggs and cow's milk in the early 1960s, and Utah State University researchers found evidence at the time that one mixture of the chemical produced abnormal results in insects.

The researchers — Nabil Younsif, William A. Brindley and Joseph C. Street — said that polychlorinated biphenyl led to house fly larvae caused clumping in the testes of the insects. PCB was recently found in eggs in Idaho, Montana and Utah, and chicken farmers voluntarily destroyed hundreds of thousands of chickens to prevent contamination of humans.

The chemical is used as a coolant in electrical equipment such as generators. Long-term exposure can cause liver problems and lesions in humans.

The IRU researchers said their studies showed that some trout fed the flies which were contaminated with the mixture — Aroclor 1254 — developed minute physiological changes.

The larvae of the flies was injected with the mixture while others were impregnated with acetone for control purposes.

Day-old male flies were immobilized and dissected. Examination

with a microscope showed that the spermatids nuclei of the flies treated with the PCB failed to divide.