Chemical Found in Chickens

Contaminated Fowl Found in 12-State Area

By Hank Burchard
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A "significant proportion" of the chickens raised in 12 states have been contaminated with a DDT-like compound, the Department of Agriculture announced yesterday.

USDA said it has "no evidence" that any of the birds have reached consumers and has taken steps to make sure none do.

The contaminant is polychlorinated biphenyls, known as PCB. For nearly three months it had been leaking into fish meal processed at the East Coast Terminal, Inc., plant in Wilmington, N.C. The meal has been sold to 64 poultry producers in Virginia, Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Indiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas and Mississippi.

PCB, like DDT, is a persistent compound that accumulates in fatty tissues and is said to cause low fertility and birth defects in animals. Its effects on humans are uncertain, but USDA has set the maximum acceptable level of PCB in marketed flesh at 5 parts per million, the same as for DDT.

Tests of poultry in markets in the South and East during the past week have found none that have as much as 5 p.p.m. of PCB, according to Dr. Fred J. Fullerton of USDA's consumer and marketing service.

"In my opinion, there would be no broilers in stores above the tolerance," Fullerton said. The agency does not regularly test for PCB.

In poultry not yet slaughtered, USDA found PCB concentrations as high as 23 p.p.m., and one poultry producer reported levels as high as 40 p.p.m.

The contamination of fish meal in the Wilmington plant was caused by leakage of PCB being used as the heat exchange mechanism in a sterilizing machine.

The accidental leakage, which may have begun around April 30, was brought to the attention of the Food and Drug Administration last week by the Monsanto Corp., sole U.S. producer of PCB compounds. FDA in turn alerted USDA on July 16.

PCB, which stands for a dozen related compounds, has been long and widely used in the U.S. as a solvent in the production of paint, pesticides plastics and resins and such items as "carbonless" carbon paper, as well as in heating and cooling machinery. Monsanto now recommends its use be limited to heat exchange systems, an FDA spokesman said.

See CHICKEN, B4, Col. 1

Chickens in 12 States Found Contaminated

CHICKEN, From B1

PCB contamination of the tissues of poultry produced in New York State last year resulted in the seizure and destruction of more than 100,000 birds. The source of contamination in that case has not been pinpointed.

Although PCB has been in use worldwide since before World War II, it was not until 1969 that its presence in soil, water and animal tissues became known.

"Environment" Magazine, which first brought the PCB problem to national attention, reported that concentrations of PCB were overlooked in chemical analyses because it is so similar to DDT.

Kevin Shea, the magazine's scientific director, yesterday disputed the government's assurances that toxic birds are not on the market. "I suspect PCB contamination may be quite widespread," he said in a telephone interview from St. Louis, Mo.

"We were told to check birds from the South more than two months ago, but haven't yet been able to track it down," he said.

Dr. Joseph Stein of USDA said the agency had "been checking chickens in the South during this period and have found nothing to lead us to suspect contamination of marketed birds."

Scientific opinion on the dangers presented by PCB is divided. USDA researchers, a spokesman said, regard the outcry over PCB (and DDT) as exaggerated.

An FDA spokesman said the agency forbids use of PCB in food or in the production of food containers. "Its effects are not known in detail," he said, "but to us it's an adulterant and impermissible."

Dr. Robert Risebrough, of the University of California at Berkeley, discovered while doing research on the brown pelican that PCB was endangering the species. Since then he has reported finding PCB residues widespread.

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