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FDA plans crackdown on PCBs

By MICHAEL J. CONLON

WASHINGTON (UPI) — The Food and Drug Administration today proposed a crackdown on the amount of a potential cancer-causing substance that may be found in dairy products, poultry, eggs and fish.

Environmentalists call the move inadequate.

Subject of the action are PCBs, widely used chemical compounds found in transformers, brake linings and many other products.

Their presence in water has caused restrictions of fishing in the Hudson River, in parts of the Great Lakes and elsewhere, and the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 90 per cent of all Americans have levels of the chemicals in their body fat.

The FDA, in a notice prepared for today's Federal Register, proposed a reduction in the amount of PCBs that will be allowed in several types of food.

The new levels would be 1.5 parts per million in milk and dairy products (compared to 2.5 ppm at present); 3 ppm in poultry (5 ppm now); 0.3 ppm for eggs (0.5 ppm now); and 2 ppm (instead of the current 5 ppm) in fish and shellfish.

The Envronmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council last fall petitioned for reductions as an interim step toward eventually outlawing PCBs entirely from food.

Dr. Joseph Highland, head of EDF's toxic chemicals program, called the FDA proposal is "disappointing and inadequate" because it does not appear to be a move toward an eventual ban.

"They're going in the right direction, clearly," he said, but added that they seem not to recognize that the PCB problem is not going to go sway. He said the EPA has estimated there are 750 million pounds of PCBs currently in service and 150 million in small doses could enter the environment, and eventually food, through garbage landfills, streams and the like.

Potentially, he said, there are five times as many PCBs waiting to enter the environment as have already caused current problems.

The FDA said PCBs are an "unavoidable contaminant" and it would be impossible to eliminate them entirely.

Highland acknowledged that a complete ban now would result in many foods being outlawed, but said his group is not asking for an immediate ban and the important point was a promise to move toward an eventual zero tolerance.

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