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Federal agencies didn't move fast enough in PCB case, say critics

by WARREN KING
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A Seattle-based egg dealer says the United States Department of Agriculture didn't take adequate precautionary measures until more than a week after his company discovered some of its eggs in Montana were contaminated with the chemical PCB.

"They moved very, very slowly. They seemed to be totally in chaos," said Jerry Bookey of Northwest Egg Sales.

The company was one of the hundreds of Western businesses and farmers affected by an accidental spill of PCB into feed tallow at a Billings, Mont., packing plant.

About 70,000 chickens at Fort Farms in Puyallup and 25,000 Northeast turkeys in Oregon were destroyed last month because of the PCB contamination. The chemical can cause reproductive failures, gastric disorders and skin lesions and has caused tumors in laboratory animals.

None of Northwest Egg's Washington-produced eggs was contaminated, Bookey said. But he said he suspected contamination at a company farm in Three Forks, Mont., when he heard in September about thousands of chickens and eggs in that state being tainted with PCB.

BOOKEY SAID he sent egg samples to a private laboratory for testing in early September. The test results came two weeks later. They showed contamination and Bookey said he immediately recalled eggs.

Bookey said the federal Food and Drug Administration contacted him in mid-September and found contamination a few days later. But the Agriculture Department didn't ask the firm to recall anything until late September, he said.

"My opinion is the F.D.A. did as well as it could in our case . . . (but) we were head and shoulders ahead of the Agriculture Department," he said.

Agriculture Department officials deny there was any unnecessary delay.

"We just didn't know how widespread the problem was," said Howard McGuire, the department's national supervisor for egg products.

He added: "We've got to have something (test results) fairly concrete before we can issue a recall."

Government officials say there is almost no chance contaminated poultry from any farm is on the market. Inspectors have traced the PCB from the Montana plant to feed mills, feed stores and farmers who purchased possibly contaminated tallow or feed.

But both the Agriculture Department and the F.D.A. have been criticized by farmers, state officials and congressmen for not moving faster to stop the spreading contamination to poultry in at least 17 states.

Senator Warren Magnuson has ordered an investigation of the incident by the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress. Idaho Gov. John V. Evans called the delay "absolutely inexcusable."

THE CONTAMINATION began sometime last June when a truck backed into an electrical transformer at the Pierce Packing Co. in Billings.

Transformer coolant containing PCB — polychlorinated biphenyl — leaked into the plant's waste water, which is used in grease that is mixed with meal for chickens and turkeys.

A routine tissue sample taken July 6 from a chicken at Rhewood Egg Co., Franklin, Idaho, showed PCB contamination. But it was August 15 by the time tests confirmed the contamination and the Agriculture Department notified the F.D.A. and the Environmental Protection Agency.

F.D.A. officials said the contamination was not announced immediately because the agency "didn't want to cause a panic."

Dr. L.J. Raforth, regional director of the Agriculture Department's meat and poultry inspection program, said critics haven't considered the magnitude of the job. "If you look at the total sample, the total number of farms visited, you get a different picture," he said.

Bookey, whose firm lost close to $1 million in the incident, says much of the problem lies in the fact that no agency tests poultry feed.

"You can put sawdust or garbage in it, but they wouldn't know it," he said. "(Therefore) they don't know where contamination is coming from.

"As a user (of feed), we write our own specifications saying this is what we need or we don't want your product, but most don't do that."

Fred Pierce, whose Billings plant produced the contaminated feed, told The Times his company had no idea it was the source of the contamination until the F.D.A. contacted him September 13. That was more than two months after the truck backed into the transformer.

THE CHEMICAL got into more than 200,000 pounds of grease that was mixed with poultry feed. Now, 108 firms and farmers have filed suit against the company, Pierce said.

He said Pierce Packing in turn plans to file suit against Monsanto Chemical, which made the transformer liquid, a fire retardant, and the General Electric Co., which made the transformer.

But Pierce noted with dismay the types of products the Environmental Protection Agency says still contain PCB: millions of electrical transformers, capacitors, heat-transfer systems and hydraulic systems.

The agency says PCBs also have been used in paints, adhesives, caulking compounds, plasticizers, inks, lubricants, carbonless copy paper, sealants, coatings and dust-control agents.

The E.P.A. has banned production of PCB, but older products containing the chemical, especially electrical equipment, remain almost everywhere.

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