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PCB Contamination Is Found In 17 States

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal inspectors have found animal feed, food and other products contaminated with the toxic chemical PCB in 17 states — including Illinois — as well as in Canada and Japan, the Department of Agriculture announced today.

Carol Tucker Foreman, an assistant agriculture secretary, told a House subcommittee that about 16,000 pounds of fresh pork had been ordered withheld from consumers because of fear of contamination by PCB, a suspected carcinogen.

However, the Food and Drug Administration said there was no immediate threat to the health of consumers in the states involved.

Miss Foreman mentioned only 10 of the 17 states in her testimony. They were Montana, Utah, Idaho, Washington, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming and Oregon.

Later, an Agriculture Department spokesman said the other states were Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, Kansas, South Dakota, Colorado and Illinois.

In addition, the FDA said it was checking for PCB contamination in California and Arizona, but none was reported in those two states. It identified the province involved in Canada as British Columbia.

PCB, or polychlorinated biphenyl, is an industrial chemical suspected of causing cancer, and it has been shown to cause skin disease and other health problems in humans.

Donald Houston, head of the Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Quality Service, said the potentially contaminated pork withheld from the market came from 336 hogs slaughtered at a plant in Idaho after they had eaten PCB-contaminated meal.

Houston said officials were testing hogs and other animals slaughtered for human consumption for any PCB contamination. So far, he said, the tests have not turned up any contaminated beef.

Sharwin Gardner, acting commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, told the subcommittee that PCB is toxic and may possibly cause "serious, long-term health problems." He added:

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

The manufacture of PCB, formerly used in many products, has been prohibited by the government, but the chemical is still in wide use in electrical transformers and other machinery as a coolant and lubricant.

Agriculture Department officials reported that there were PCB problems on a vast scale in the early 1970s, including one incident in which the chemical tainted fish meal used for poultry feed. About 10 million chickens were destroyed in the Southeast in that incident.

In 1971, about 50,000 turkeys in Minnesota were affected by another PCB-feed incident. More than 1.5 million chickens were destroyed in Maine in 1972 because of PCB contamination.