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How Dangerous Is PCB Chemical?

By James Bishop Jr.
(Newsweek Feature Columnist)
The bad news began in 1968—500 Japanese were stricken and five killed after eating codling oil that contained large amounts of PCB, a chemical compound previously considered harmless.

That ended the human toll, so far as is known, but in subsequent years PCB was responsible for mass animal deaths. In 1969, 12,000 sea birds washed ashore on the coast of the Irish Sea, victims of PCB poisoning. In 1970, 10,000 PCB-contaminated chickens were destroyed in New York on federal order. This year, 10,000 turkeys in Wisconsin and 84,000 chickens in North Carolina were destroyed for the same reason.

This year, too, has come the most frightening discov-

ery of all. PCB has been found in cardboard containers for breakfast foods, crackers, bread crumbs, macaroni, snack chips, chocolate, cocoa and dried milk.

"I hate to say this," says a senior official of the Food and Drug Administration, "but PCB is everywhere. And we don't know if we should — or should not — be alarmed."

But many scientists are very much alarmed, indeed. They point out that PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) can be fatal in large doses and that in smaller quantities it can cause impaired vision, abdominal pains and liver ailments.

There also is a school of scientific thought that holds the compound may bring out genetic defects in future generations.

In California, some 1,000 aborted sea lion pups have washed ashore during the last two years. Investigators believe they have found a correlation between high levels of PCB in adult female sea lions and aborted fetuses.

PCB is not a new product. The colorless, odorless compound is fully 90 years old and has been mass-produced by the Monsanto Company — and in Europe and Japan — since well before World War II.

Its use is not only in food products. Because it speeds heat transference, it is considered vital for electric insulation. And it is also widely used in paints, inks, tires, brake linings and non-carbon duplicating paper.

It was even contained in the paper of all Federal income-tax forms last year.

Ironically, in view of the heated reaction from environmentalists to the disclosures of PCB's dangers, it was that cardinal environmental principle — recycling — which brought the compound into use in cardboard food containers. The containers are made from recycled paper whose inks presumably contained PCB.

For the present, the FDA takes the position that these containers are not dangerous — so long as the buyer eats the contents, not the cardboard. Anyway, Monsanto, still the only U.S. producer, has restricted its sales of PCB to heavy industry.

Though a voluntary ban on PCB sales has been in effect in Britain since March, U.S. authorities are holding back. The FDA considers a total ban on PCB as "not feasible

and, indeed, agency officials tend to downgrade the spreading national concern.

Commissioner Charles F. Edwards criticizes "a few alarmists seeking headline" and, while conceding that PCB is "a potential but not immediate health hazard," insists that "the alarm is greater than the facts justify."

To some conservationist-

minded legislators, the FDA's statement struck a familiar note. "Unfortunately, the FDA seems to be unconcerned about the impact of American industry than the level of public knowledge of its food supply," says Sen. William F. Ryan of New York. And Ryan has introduced a bill in Congress for the complete banning of PCB.