U.S. Aides Try to Calm Fears Over Chemical PCB

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 29 — Leading Federal food, health and environmental officials sought today to calm public concern over the possible hazards of PCB, the chemical contaminant akin to DDT.

Dr. Charles C. Edwards, head of the Food and Drug Administration, said that public confusion about PCB "is compounded by a few alarmists seeking headlines aided and abetted by unbalanced reporting."

"Public confusion has created public alarm and a feeling of still another crisis in the food supply," he said. "I know the confusion is unnecessary, and I believe the alarm is greater than the facts will justify."

The agency released data collected over the last 22 months showing that the chemical had been found in only 501 of 15,720 food samples. More than half the contaminated samples were fish, indicating that there had been concentration of PCB in the marine food chain.

Many of the other tainted samples had been packed in boxes made from recycled cardboard — cardboard reprocessed from waste paper. The use of this material for packaging food ceased three months ago, F.D.A. officials said.

In addition, Dr. Douglas Worf of the Environmental Protection Agency reported that PCB had been found in human blood plasma, but only in minute quantities.

The officials used such data to underline their stated position that the use of PCB was, as Dr. Edwards put it, "a potential but not immediate health hazard."

However, during a news conference at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare that the agencies had called to "sort out" the PCB controversy, some officials appeared to have raised more questions than they settled.

Dr. Edwards, for example, said that some restriction on the use of PCB might be considered but added that "an outright ban is not feasible."

Asked why a ban was not possible in the United States when one has existed in Britain since March, he and his deputies expressed amazement that it had been in effect there. The British action was taken following the deaths through PCB contamination of tens of thousands of fish and marine birds.

Dr. Edwards insisted that PCB might even be beneficial because it has "important flame-resistant properties and, properly used, [they] directly assist government and industry in protecting the consumer against fire." The chemical can withstand extremely high temperatures.

The officials also avoided giving an explanation of how they could maintain that a feeling of "public alarm" was unjustified when the only manufacturer of PCB in the United States has repeatedly refused to make public the amount of the chemical it has made and is making. The officials said only that they hoped that the manufacturer, the Monsanto Company of St. Louis, would provide the information to a Federal study group investigating PCB that was created early this month.

The F.D.A. made public a detailed account of the "current toxicology status of PCB's" which did not include the fact that five Japanese died three years ago in the most serious accident involving the chemical, which had contaminated cooking oil.

Another official at the news conference, Clayton Yeutter, administrator of the Department of Agriculture's Consumer and Marketing Service, said that the PCB contamination of 50,000 turkeys in Minnesota last month "was an isolated occurrence."

When it was pointed out that 146,000 PCB - contaminated chickens were destroyed in New York State last year and an additional 88,000 chickens were destroyed in July after PCB-contaminated feed was discovered in North Carolina, Mr. Yeutter said such incidents did not happen often.

PCB contamination has also been traced this year to tens of thousands of eggs and thousands of tons of fish meal. PCB is being found increasingly as a contaminant because analytic methods of detecting it in small amounts did not exist until several years ago.

Representative William F. Ryan, Democrat of Manhattan, who has complained for two years that the Federal Government has not been strict enough in regulating PCB, announced after the news conference that he would introduce a bill next week to ban the chemical.

"No one is saying that PCB is an acute hazard to health," Mr. Ryan said. "The point is that the chemical is known to be an environmental hazard now to birds and marine life, and may be a long-term hazard to man. We should stop its use until we know more about it."

Several scientists have testified before Congressional committees that the concern about PCB is not that the chemical itself is a danger to man, but that its interaction with an array of other substances in the environment may be harmful over periods of years or decades.

PCB also has been used as a heat transfer material, a plasticizer in inks, paints and plastics, and a solvent for pesticides. It is known to cause liver damage and malformations in fish and birds, and has stunted growth in rats fed large amounts.

Second Generation Affected

A Cornell University scientist, in studies on birds, found that harmful effects of PCB tended to show up in the second generation after exposure to the chemical.

In the Cornell test PCB was fed in dosages of 10 parts per million (5 parts per million are permitted residues in fish and poultry) in food pellets to six pairs of ring doves who had previously been bred successfully.

No Hatching Failures

These birds then had two more broods, three months and six months later, with no hatching failures, according to the scientist, David B. Peakall.

However, when the young were paired and bred six to eight months later, embryos died before hatching in eight of the first 10 eggs laid. Dr. Peakall said that he did not yet know what had gone wrong, but that chromosome studies were now under way. DDT impairs reproduction in birds by hampering the formation of sturdy eggshells.

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