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Toxicity Cited

FDA Cuts PCB Levels Allowed in Some Foods

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WASHINGTON — The Food and Drug Administration Thursday lowered the allowable levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) allowed in fish, poultry and dairy products.

The new lower levels are being set because "new evidence indicates that these chemicals are more toxic than previously thought. Recent studies have linked PCB's to liver tumors and reproductive problems in test animals," FDA said in explaining the new directive.

The new PCB levels, effective August 28, will cause a loss to commercial fishing of about $6 million a year, the FDA notes.

The new tolerance for PCB's in fish and shellfish is two parts per million, instead of five parts per million (PPM). The tolerance for milk and dairy products will be reduced to 1.5 ppm instead of 2.5. The poultry limit will be 3 ppm instead of 5 ppm and the egg level will be reduced to 0.3 ppm from 0.5 ppm.

FDA Commissioner Donald Kennedy is also writing the governors of 11 states urging them to apply the FDA limits to fish and other food shipped within the state's borders. FDA is particularly concerned about the consumption of large amounts of PCB's contaminated fish by women of child bearing age.

The highest levels of PCB's are concentrated in certain freshwater fish including coho and chinook salmon from the Great Lakes and freshwater trout and catfish.

PCB's are highly concentrated chemicals used for industrial purposes that have become contaminants from past uncontrolled use.

PCBs were specificlaly banned by a 1976 law, and the Environmental Protection Agency has phased out new uses of them. However, an estimated 758 million pounds of the chemicals are still in use in electrical transformers and capacitors, railroad tranformers, hydraulic systems, mining equipment, electromagnets, pigments and other industrial processes.

In addition, millions of pounds of the chemicals which were used over the years still remain in the environment where they do not break down readily and can be absorbed by fish.

The Environmental Defense Fund has said recent evience "shows that PCBs cause cancer, reproductive failure and other harmful effects in animals, as well as range of adverse health effects in humans such as skin discase, nervous disorders and stillbirths."

The FDA first set tolerances in food for PCBs in 1973 and since then, it said the amount of the chemicals in the diet has "dropped significantly."

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