U.S. Moves to Ease Fear of PCB Taint

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New York Times News Service

Leading federal food, health and environmental officials are trying to calm public concern over the possible hazards of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls), the chemical contaminant related to DDT.

Dr. Charles C. Edwards, head of the Food and Drug Administration, said yesterday 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. Over half the contaminated samples were fish, indicating concentration of PCB in the marine food supply.

Found in Plasma

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

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

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

However, during a news conference held at the headquarters of 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.

Amazed at British Ban

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

When asked why a ban is not possible in the United States when one has existed in Great 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.

Edwards insisted that PCB might even be beneficial, because it has "important flame-properties and properly used, directly assists government and industry in protecting the consumer against fire." The chemical has the unusual property of withstanding extremely high temperatures.

The officials also ducked an explanation of how they could maintain that a feeling of "public alarm" was unjustified when the only U.S. manufacturer of PCB repeatedly has refused to make public the amount of the chemical it has made and is making. The officials said only that they hope the manufacturer, the Monsanto Corp. of St. Louis, will provide the information to a new federal study group investigating PCB.

The FDA made public a detailed account of the "current toxicology status of PCBs" which failed to include the fact that five Japanese died three years ago in the most serious accident involving the chemical. In that case, PCB had contaminated cooking oil.

Another official at the news conference, Clayton Yeutter, administrator of the Department of Agriculture's Consumer and Marketing Service, said PCB contamination of 29,000 turkeys in Minnesota last month "was an isolated occurence."

When it was pointed out that 146,000 PCB-contaminated chickens were destroyed in New York State last year and an additional 30,000 chickens were destroyed in July after PCB-contaminated feed was discovered in North Carolina, Yeutter said such incidents do not happen often.

PCB contamination also has 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.

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