WASHINGTON STAR

Danger From Chickens Declining, Tests Show

By JAMES WELSH
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The Agriculture Department today reported preliminary test results showing that chickens, fed on contaminated fish meal in a 10-state area and now being processed for retail sale, do not contain levels of chemical residue sufficient to harm the public.

The implication of the initial test results is that chickens on the market now may well be safe—although chickens sold in June and earlier this month may not have been.

Millions of chickens were feared tainted after the discovery that an industrial chemical, polychlorinated biphenyl or PCB, had been leaking for more than two months into fish meal processed at a plant in North Carolina.

Agriculture officials launched a crash test program last Friday, taking some 400 samples of broilers, and also swine, at slaughterhouses throughout the Southeast region.

With 137 of those samples now reported, Dr. Fred Fullerton, chief of Agriculture's meat and poultry inspection division, said today that traces of PCB were found in the majority of cases. But none of the samples revealed levels higher than that declared tolerable by the Food and Drug Administration.

FDA's limit is 5 parts per million of the chemical.

Fullerton said the highest found in the current samples tested so far was 1.4 parts per million.

All but about 30 of the samples, however, showed some trace of the PCBs.

Of the 137 tests, 124 were for poultry. The remaining 13 were for swine. The highest level of PCBs found in the swine samples was 1.3 parts per million.

"We're breathing easier, but we're still watching closely for the rest of the test results," he said.

Lab reports on the other samples are expected by tomorrow.

The chemical leaked from a heat exchanger into the fish meal over a 10-week period beginning about April 30.

Largest Grower

Holly Farms, the world's largest poultry raiser, discovered something wrong with the way eggs were hatching at its big North Carolina operation in mid-July and traced the problem back to the fish meal plant in Wilmington. Monsanto Corp., the manufacturer of PCBs, also was consulted.

On July 16, Monsanto notified the Food and Drug Administration of the trouble. FDA tests over the next two days, a weekend resulted in closing the Wilmington plant.

Holly Farms told Agriculture officials of the problem on July 19, a week ago Monday. But it was not until a week ago today, that FDA was able to supply Agriculture with a list of the 65 firms throughout the Southeast where the contaminated fish meal had been sold.

Agriculture officials began the hurry-up testing program the next day.

Throughout last week and much of this week, the department soft-pedaled the nature of the problem, simply saying in a press announcement that some tests were being run.

By yesterday Agriculture officials were telling a fuller story after news stories appeared that Holly Farms had to kill about 77,000 chickens because they contained higher than tolerable PCB levels.

The 16,000 tons of fish meal that were contaminated since April 30 were used in the production of up to 800,000 tons of feed for chickens, fowl and swine. This feed was capable in turn of raising hundreds of millions of chickens.

The FDA tests July 17 showed PCB levels of 15 to 20 parts per million in the fish meal at the Wilmington plant.

Dilution occurred as the fish meal became a small part of the chicken feed, but it was feared that animals raised on the feed over the course of weeks would build up much higher levels of the chemical in body tissues.

A campaign to recall the tainted fish meal has only been fractionally successful, according to FDA.

Of the 16,000 tons sent from the plant, about 1,000 tons have been returned. Most of the remainder can be presumed to have been used.

PCBs have been used for a number of years in a wide variety of industrial and agricultural operations. Only in recent years was it discovered that significant amounts of the chemicals had been building up in the environment.

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