Idaho food found safe from PCBs

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By LONNIE ROSENWALD
The Idaho Statesman

After scrutinizing egg noodles, stewing chickens, mayonnaise and other supermarket products in Idaho, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said Tuesday that the state's food was safe from PCBs.

But PCB-contaminated eggs have been found on the shelf of a Billings, Mont., grocery store, and Montana chickens still are laying PCB filled eggs, the agency said.

FDA spokeswoman Sue Hutchcroft, Seattle, said 180 packages of food sampled in supermarkets in Boise, Idaho Falls and Franklin last week were found Tuesday to contain PCB levels "beneath tolerance, and some below the level of detection."

"The food supply does not contain any levels of PCBs that would present a health hazard," Hutchcroft told The Statesman.

Hutchcroft said the FDA sampled 2 bags of egg noodles, 5 cartons of eggs, 5 packages of stewing chickens, 5 packages of pork and 10 one-pint jars of mayonnaise in 2

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PCBs

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stores in each of the 3 Idaho areas. She said she did not know the names of the stores.

Earlier this summer, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the FDA discovered PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls — and contaminated chickens and eggs at the Ritewood Egg Co. in Franklin. In early September the FDA detected PCBs in eggs on supermarket shelves in Logan, Utah, that exceeded tolerance levels.

Last week was the first time the agency tested food in Idaho stores.

Tests in Seattle, Spokane, Yakima and Vancouver, Wash., also turned up negligible amounts of the chemical, Hutchcroft said.

Oregon test results have not been received, she said.

So far, only Montana foods have failed the PCB test. Three egg samples taken in Montana Sept. 22-23, including one from eggs on sale at a Buttrey's Foods supermarket in Billings and 2 from 2 shipments that had been removed from sale in unidentified stores, had PCB levels between .3 and 1.9 parts per million (ppm), according to FDA Investigations Supervisor Leroy Gomez in Denver. The FDA doesn't allow the sale of eggs with a concentration of PCBs of more than .3 ppm.

The egg problem stems from the widespread sale of PCB-contaminated animal feed by the Pierce Packing Co. in Billings earlier this summer. PCBs leaked from a ruptured electrical transformer at Pierce into ingredients for a 1.9 million-pound batch of meat meal.

Before the leak was discovered, the meat meal was sold to farms and feed dealers in Montana, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, North Dakota and Minnesota.

In eastern Idaho, contamination was found at Ritewood and at a Wendell hog farm.

Contamination also has turned up in chickens and eggs at 3 Montana farms, all Pierce customers. Montana Farms in Townsend and Cherry Lane Farms in Three Forks both recalled eggs Sept. 17. At the same time, 54 Buttrey's, Safeway Stores and Albertsons Inc. stores in Montana and Wyoming removed all eggs from shelves and restocked with eggs the stores said were not from contaminated farms.

Buttrey's posted signs reading "California eggs only," according to spokesman Bob Bruskotter in Great Falls.

Last weekend Montana Farms, partly owned by Safeway, destroyed 1.7 million eggs that were returned by supermarkets.

Gomez said Duncan Farms near Billings supplied the contaminated eggs found at Buttrey's.

Buttrey's could not be reached to explain how Duncan Farms eggs got mixed in with its California eggs.

Gomez said Buttrey's "was lied to and accepted some eggs that were contaminated from a supplier who said he did not buy from Pierce." He refused to identify the supplier.

Gomez said the store since required a written statement of clearance from a government agency before accepting egg shipments.

He said PCB contaminated eggs still were being produced at Montana Farms, which is trying to "cure" its chickens by feeding them uncontaminated feed. But the farm will have to destroy the chickens if they don't pass PCB tests, he said.

The FDA still is checking for PCBs at Montana stores and farms, and at Montana and North Dakota feed dealers.

Three other samples in Montana stores showed traces of PCBs below federal levels, and the rest were negative, Gomez said.

An official at the Independent Meat Co. in Twin Falls, a meat packing company cleared by the USDA of suspicions of contamination Monday, said Tuesday that the plant would renew pork production this week.

"By the end of the week we should have products in stores," Manager Pat Florence said.

PCBs, heat resistant oil ingredients, once were used as a coolant in electrical equipment. The chemical's manufacture was banned by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency this year. In high doses, it has been shown to cause tumors and skin disease in laboratory animals and skin diseases in human beings.

A half million chickens throughout the Northwest have been destroyed in recent weeks because of excessive amounts of PCBs from the current contamination. Excessive PCB levels also led to the dumping of strawberry cakes and processed chicken that would have been used in soups and TV dinners.

FROM MICHIGAN, KANSAS

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Idaho Won't Take PCB-tainted Cows

BOISE (AP) — Idaho officials have rejected requests to dispose of contaminated cattle from Kansas and Michigan in an abandoned missile silo near Grand View, although the site is recognized as one of the country's top dumping grounds for PCB, a cancer-causing chemical.

When Kansas environmental officials wanted to bring 113 PCB contaminated cows to the Wes-Con waste disposal site near Grand View, Gov. John Evans said "no."

The refusal came a month after Idaho officials turned down a similar disposal request from Michigan, where the frozen carcasses of 30,000 PBB-contaminated cows have been awaiting burial for several years.

Evans' press secretary Don Watkins said the governor balked at the cattle shipments because he felt they would "create ill feeling" among Idahoans.

But Watkins said there would probably be no problem with a shipment of 17 barrels of PCB-filled waste from Colorado announced Monday.

Watkins said the state has no legal control over the privately-owned storage facility, but Wes-Con owner Gene Rinebold agreed to turn down the disposal deals, which he said could have earned him more than $350,000.

"The public relations would have been horrible," Rinebold said.

Wes-Con is one of three western facilities where the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency allows permanent disposal of PCBs, PBBs, DDT and other toxic chemicals.

But Idaho officials said the waste site is not intended to serve as a repository for contaminated cows or the political problems of other states.

"Wes-Con is of value to the people of the state so they can dispose of material generated or used in the state," said Idaho Environmental Division Director Lee Stokes, who argued against both shipments.

The Michigan cows were contaminated in 1973 with PBBs, a carcinogenic chemical similar to PCBs, which was unintentionally mixed with cattle feed. Thousands of cattle were killed and Michigan health officials estimated the substance was ingested by every resident of the state.

Stokes said the cattle contamination levels were within federal guidelines, but above strict standards set by the state.

For the past six years, he said, Michigan residents have blocked burial efforts in their state. The cows lay in open trenches for years before public outcry forced the state to butcher and freeze them.

"If Michigan could solve its own political problems it could bury them anywhere in Michigan," Stokes said.

The Kansas cows, which would have been shipped live to Wes-Con, posed a different problem for Idaho officials and Wes-Con. Environmental officials in Kansas refused Stokes' request that the cattle, whose coats a farmer mistakenly rubbed with PCB-filled oil, be slaughtered before being shipped to Idaho for burial.

The spectre of a concentration camp-like cattle slaughter on the Grand View desert deterred Rinebold. He said he "could see the pictures on the front page of cattle standing out there and being shot."

Stokes said Kansas "didn't want to spend the money" to kill and package the contaminated cattle.