PCB-Articles

Contamination From PCB Is Traced To Its Source

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Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

WHEN THE FEDERAL Food and Drug Administration acknowledged last month that its investigators had found breakfast cereal contaminated by recycled cardboard packaging, it illustrated an oft-sounded warning: The solution to one environmental problem may create new and more serious problems.

Or, as Dr. Samuel Epstein, a Boston researcher, once put it, "Out of the ecological frying pan, into the toxicological fire."

St. Louis environmentalist Barry Commoner likes to say it another way: "There's no such thing as a free lunch."

What the FDA's field office in Cincinnati discovered was that some shredded wheat made by Sunshine Biscuits, Inc., contained as much as 24 parts per million of a toxic substance known as polychlorinated biphenyl, or PCB for short, made in this country exclusively by Monsanto Co.

LITTLE KNOWN OUTSIDE the chemical industry until recently, PCB is a colorless, odorless viscous fluid which was invented more than 70 years ago. It now has an astonishing variety of industrial applications.

It is employed as a softener for plastics, in printing inks, for coating papers, as an additive to pesticides and as a heat resistant insulator in electrical equipment.

Because it is so common, it has turned up almost everywhere. In Japan three years ago, PCB contamination of cooking oil killed five persons and afflicted 1000 others with an acute skin malady known as chloracne. It is known to cause liver damage and malformations in fish.

Because of its chemical kinship to DDT, it is now suspected of causing fragile egg shells among birds. In fact much of the damage to birds of prey once blamed on DDT may have been caused by the much more abundant PCB, some scientists believe.

Although the shredded wheat discovery was disclosed only recently, it actually was made last June in the course of a market basket survey quietly instituted after several previous incidents.

WHEN PCBs WERE FOUND in the cereal, investigators suspected the packaging, because two months earlier 146,000 chickens from three counties in upstate New York were found contaminated by feed which was in turn tainted by packaging containing PCBs.

Tests of the cardboard showed PCB levels ranging from one to 433 parts per million. (The danger level set by the FDA for PCB in milk is two parts per million).

A check with the box manufacturer showed that 95 per cent of the cardboard — the grey kind commonly used for light containers — was recycled. The culprit was found to be PCB-treated "carbonless" carbon paper scraps from a National Cash Register Co. business forms plant.

The firm had purchased the PCB from Monsanto, apparently sometime last winter.

The disclosure came as a surprise to some observers because Monsanto, partly in response to pressure from environmentalists in the St. Louis area, had pledged more than a year earlier to stop selling PCBs for any purpose other than closed systems (such as sealed electrical equipment) where they could not pollute the environment.

IN JULY 1970, the company formalized the pledge with an announcement that sales for open systems had been discontinued.

But the last shipment of PCBs from Monsanto's Krummrich plant in Sauget, Ill., to National Cash Register did not take place until eight months later, a company spokesman acknowledged. Monsanto had continued to make good-on sales contracts signed before the embargo went into effect, he explained.

He went on to say that as of now, Monsanto has ceased not only sales but shipments of PCBs for environmentally hazardous uses. What is more, it has offered to take back (if the freight is paid by the shipper) all unused or unwanted PCBs from its customers.

What cannot be recycled will be destroyed at a newly-installed high temperature incinerator at the Krummrich plant, he said.

Finally, Monsanto has offered to reveal its PCB production and sales figures, in confidence, to federal officials. Not to anyone else, however.

THE PERFORMANCE OF BOTH the FDA and industry has brought down the wrath of United States Representative William F. Ryan (Dem.) New York, who has fought a lonely battle for control of PCBs for the past two years. Among Ryan's complaints:

(1) The shredded wheat finding, though made in June, was not made public until Ryan learned of it and demanded a report. "That's typical of the FDA," he said. "They're more concerned about industry than the integrity of the food supply."

(2) So far the FDA's response to the problem has been to meet with industry people and to reassure the public there is no immediate danger from PCBs. Ryan favors banning the chemical until there are assurances it can be used safely.

(3) The FDA has ordered all its field offices to make checks for PCBs and to report Nov. 1. This has come about only because of Ryan-generated publicity, the Congressman said.

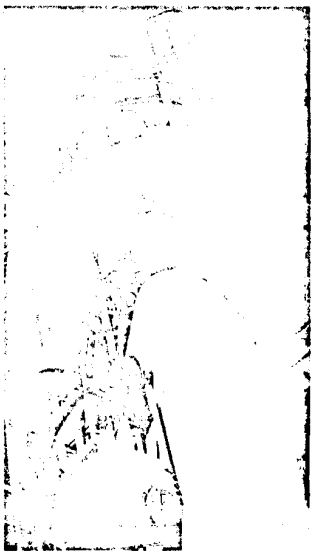
(4) Monsanto's promise not to sell PCBs for open uses is suspect, since it was shipping them for a year after it first announced the self-imposed restrictions.

(5) There is a serious question as to how closed "closed" systems really are. Last July, for example, PCBs leaked out of a supposedly leakproof heat transfer system and contaminated tons of fish meal in a plant at Wilmington, N.C. The meal was fed to chickens and subsequentiv 88,000 broilers and 6900 dozen eggs were pulled off the market but another 3000 dozen equally contaminated eggs were sold to consumers in the Washington, D.C. area.

(6) Monsanto deserves no great applause for its action in limiting sales, Ryan contends. It won't lose sales to its competitors because it has none. "We've given up on Monsanto," said a Ryan aid. "We've found them less than candid, in fact, sort of deceptive, in the two years we've been dealing with them."

(7) Monsanto's refusal to make its sales figures public precludes study of the problem by independent scientific groups outside the Government.

Monsanto's reply to Ryan is that it supports current federal efforts for continuing research in control of the problems. FDA commissioner Dr. Charles C. Edwards issued a statement rejecting an outright ban as infeasible and "crisis headlines" as unwarranted.



CLEAN BURNER: Monsanto's $500,000 incinerator, recently installed at the company's Krummrich plant on the East Side to destroy waste PCBs returned by industrial customers. Customers pay 3 cents a pound for the service.

Correction

A cutline beneath a photograph which appeared on the Challenges Page last July 13 stated that Merrill Farms of Salinas, Calif., did not employ union labor.

Merrill Farms employs members of the AFL-CIO Packing House Workers Union and members of the Teamsters Union in several of its operations.

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