WESSEL REVEALS FDA IS REEVALUATING PCB TOLERANCE FOR FISH

John R. Wessel of the Food and Drug Administration's Office of the Associate Commissioner for Compliance revealed last week that his agency is reevaluating the adequacy of the current tolerance for polychlorinated biphenyls in fish.

In a report to the Environmental Protection Agency's National Conference on PCBs last week in Chicago (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, Oct. 13, Page 9), he said the evaluation includes a review of all recently reported studies on the toxicity of PCBs, as well as a review of available data on current PCB levels in fish and the economic impact that would result from a lowering of the current 5 p.p.m. tolerance.

Canadian officials were reportedly ready to announce a 2 p.p.m. tolerance for PCBs in fish as a result of data presented at the conference (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, Nov. 10, Page 39).

Wessel emphasized that any decision by the FDA to lower the PCB tolerance would be published as a proposal in the Federal Register along with a detailed explanation, allowing time for comment.

A lowering of the tolerance by FDA will not in itself prevent the further pollution of the environment with PCBs, he noted, adding:

> "Nor will it guarantee that suddenly all fish available for consumption will comply with the tolerance since only fish involved in interstate commerce are subject to FDA's jurisdiction. Thus, FDA enforcement of a lower tolerance will not necessarily result in additional protection for each and every consumer. Furthermore, even if warnings and advisories are issued by FDA and state officials, there is no assurance that sports fishermen and, perhaps others, would abide by these warnings."

Noting that the problem of preventing PCB contamination is complex, the FDA-er called "for controlling the industrial uses of PCBs and for regulating the discharges of PCBs into the waters of the United States."

He reported to the conference that surveillance data from FDA, the Department of Agriculture and other agencies show that the presence of PCBs in foods and feeds subject to tolerances has continued to be random and sporadic since FDA initiated its control programs in 1972. He announced, however, that there has been an overall substantial decline in frequency and levels.

Occasional shipments of food exceeding tolerances have been encountered during the past two years, Wessel recalled, citing the problems in fish resulting from continued industrial discharge into lakes and rivers.

MONS 032615

He added that "reports of PCB levels in freshwater fish from certain waters at 5 to 10 times higher than the FDA tolerance of 5 p.p.m. are reasons for concern, particularly

since there is little, if any, scientific disagreement that the regular and consistent consumption of fish at these levels may pose a potentially serious threat to the consumer."

Dr. A. C. Jelinek, Director of the Division of Chemical Technology in FDA's Bureau of Foods, reported on PCB levels detected from the agency's various studies, including Comprehensive Fish Surveys and annual Total Diet Studies.

In the report, co-authored by P. E. Corneliussen, Jelinek concluded that the breadth of PCB occurrence had narrowed to the point where fresh water fish are now the primary source of PCBs in the diet.

He noted, however, that daily PCB intake for the average citizen is low, since he consumes small quantities of fresh water fish. On the other hand, he cautioned, the estimates may be "quite different" for those people whose diets include significant quantities of sports fish. For the future, the FDA-er called on FDA to continue to monitor for PCBs in foods and food-packaging materials.

He also emphasized the need for responsible federal and State agencies to effectively halt the entry of PCBs into the aquatic environment.

EPA Administrator Russell E. Train told the conference that an effective Toxic Substances Control Law would have enabled EPA to deal effectively with the PCB problem, complaining:

> "We find ourselves without the authority we need to really cope with the problems posed by PCBs -- the authority to limit selected uses and distribution of PCBs as well as to require testing concerning the health and ecological effects of proposed substitutes."

He promised EPA would do what it could under existing authority, including use of the Safe Water Act, while recognizing "the inherent inadequacies of the piecemeal approach we are forced to take."

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FDA CONTRACTS FOR FOOD ADDITIVE BEHAVIORAL EFFECT TESTING

The Food and Drug Administration has contracted with the Institute of Developmental Research at the Children's Hospital Research Foundation in Cincinnati to test four food additives for behavior effects in rats.

The contract, which calls for expenditures of $84,000 the first year renewable for four additional years contingent on funds being available, is part of the agency's widening interest in determining whether additives are the cause of human intolerance reactions, including:

(1) Chemically induced neurobehavioral reactions; (2) Classical neurotoxicological reactions; or (3) Allergic or allergic-like reactions.