Law Sought to Ban DDT-Like Chemical

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A New York congressman said yesterday he will introduce a bill to ban all use of a DDT-like compound that has contaminated human and wildlife food chains in the U.S. and around the world.

The announcement by Rep. William Fitts Ryan (D-N.Y.) came after it was revealed Friday that high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) had been found in fish meal fed to poultry in 12 states, including Virginia and Delaware, over the past three months.

A Department of Agriculture spokesman said yesterday that fish meal from the same Wilmington, N.C., plant had also been fed to an unknown number of hogs. The department said it does not believe any of the poultry or pork involved has reached consumer markets and is moving to prevent them from being sold.

Fish meal produced by East Coast Terminal, Inc., of Wilmington, was contaminated from about April until the plant was ordered closed Friday. The PCB, being used as the heat transfer medium in sterilizing vats, leaked unnoticed into the meal.

The contamination was not discovered by any government agency. It came to light when a customer of the Monsanto Corp., the sole U.S. producer of PCB, complained that his chickens were being sickened and their eggs were of low fertility.

Monsanto traced the problem to the chicken feed and the feed to the Wilmington plant, then notified the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which notified USDA, which a week later made the first public announcement.

'Gross Neglect'

Ryan, whose office has been investigating the PCB problem for two years, said the case "graphically illustrates the gross neglect of the federal government to take preventive action against the uncontrolled use of deadly chemicals by American industry."

He said his bill would be introduced Monday. It will replace his HR8376, introduced May 19, which would permit the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare to exempt certain uses of PCBs from the ban.

"This latest case convinces us there is no safe way for the stuff to be used," said Ryan aide Chic Edwards.

Use Limited

A spokesman for the Monsanto Corp. said yesterday the use of PCBs is "absolutely essential" for heavy electrical equipment and that the company has taken "very stringent measures" to control use of the compound.

Since last August, he said, Monsanto has withdrawn PCBs from sale for any purpose other than as the insulating fluid in electrical capacitors, as a coolant in transformers or as a fire-resistant ingredient in industrial heating and cooling systems. The embargo also applies to the United Kingdom, in which Monsanto also has a monopoly in PCBs.

For more than 40 years before the Monsanto action, PCBs, which are a group of a dozen chlorinated hydrocarbons, had been widely used as plasticisers (softeners) in paints, sealants, adhesives and other surface coatings, with miscellaneous applications in thermostats, feed, pharmaceuticals and hydraulic fluids, according to the April, 1971, "New Scientist and Science Journal."

A spokesman for the National Paint, Varnish & Lacquer Association, Inc., said yesterday that PCBs "never have been widely used" in paints. They had certain limited industrial applications and are no longer used. Any paint buyer may be assured the products contain no PCBs."

Effects Like DDT

The effects of PCBs in animals are similar to those of DDT, and before 1966 the presence of the compound in the biological chain was not suspected because it was mistaken for DDT in laboratory analyses.

There is no consensus among scientists about how dangerous the compound is. Their concern centers on the fact that PCBs, like DDT, is a highly stable compound that breaks down slowly. A worldwide ban on PCBs and DDT will be proposed at the United Nations environmental conference in Stockholm next year.

It is insoluble in water but soluble in fats, a factor which causes it to become concentrated in the tissues of progressively larger animals in the food chain. Residues of up to 1000 parts per million (p.p.m.) have been found in the tissues of American seabirds. The USDA Rules do not permit sale for human consumption of flesh containing more than 5 p.p.m. Some chickens fed on the contaminated fish meal have been found to contain up to 40 p.p.m.

Last December a Campbell's Soup plant in New Jersey discovered impermissible levels of PCBs in chickens purchased from New York growers. Again the discovery was made in private tests, since the federal government does not regularly test for PCBs in marketed flesh.

Chemical Traced

New York State officials traced the contamination to chicken feed produced in a plant that uses stale bakery goods (which may have been wrapped in plastic made with a PCB). Some 146,000 chickens were destroyed and buried.

Earlier, milk from two Ohio dairy herds was found to contain PCBs derived from silage stored in silos painted with PCB-treated epoxys.

Government regulation of PCBs has been limited. The USDA recently banned their use in pesticides, and the FDA does not permit them to be added to food products. A half dozen other agencies say they are considering regulations.

Monsanto's recognition of PCBs as an ecological hazard and its voluntary ban on their use except in "closed-system" equipment is very nearly unique in industry, according to the scientific journal.

The company also collects used PCBs from its customers and destroys them in a special incinerator in Illinois.

Monsanto Tests

Recently completed Monsanto tests, conducted over two years, showed that rats fed food containing up to 100 p.p.m. showed enlargement of the liver but suffered no other effects, the company spokesman said. Dogs showed no ill effects, he said.

Rep. Ryan said he was skeptical of tests ordered by the company for its own products.

Edwards, his aide, said "It's ridiculous to have to introduce a bill every time another family of dangerous compounds turns up in our bodies and throughout the environment, but, given the repeated failure of government agencies to act, there's nothing else we can do."

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