

# Is food safe? Chemical tests may miss much

By LONNIE ROSENWALD  
The Idaho Statesman

The food in your refrigerator could contain poison. It might have been exposed in random inspections that are used to identify toxic substances. Or it may contain an unhealthy dose of one of 10 chemicals that sometimes cannot detect in food, but which are legal to use in agriculture.

It's an unsettling possibility. How is the average American, whose only interaction with his food is to unwrap it, drop it in a pot and swallow it, going to tell whether his next meal might be his last?

Last July and August at least 18 million eggs believed to contain varying amounts of PCBs were sold in Idaho, Utah and California before the lethal substance was uncovered in a spot check at a Utah chicken processing plant. During those 2 months, people ate the innocent looking eggs without realizing what was in them.

Later, the egg-eating public learned the eggs probably contained a mixture of oil incident called polychlorinated biphenyls, which has caused tumors, birth defects and skin disease in laboratory animals, and which is suspected of causing cancer in humans.

Beginning on a yet unidentified day in June, the PCBs spread quickly through the food chain, from chickens to eggs to soups and frozen chicken breast cakes. In 2 months time, people ate a Utah chicken inspection identified this same June as the contamination.

Some say the contamination, which reached Ohio, Minnesota, California, Minnesota, Iowa and possibly other states, could have been prevented by faster inspections. Others say the problem was not in detection, but in the reporting of the PCBs. But when inspectors of the affected slaughter and inspection of FDLIS in Idaho, Idaho's Department of Agriculture, was notified of the importance of their own period, they reported additional 3 weeks passed before the state and the federal learned of the contamination Sept. 12.

No matter where the blame falls, the PCB incident reminds us such contaminants can and do occur frequently, despite quality control efforts. In the aftermath, food officials shared some thoughts on the safety of what Americans eat.

Food has been subject to federal and state inspection since Congress passed the Meat and Poultry Inspection Act of 1906. Today fresh meat and produce are tested in several ways.

There are 8,500 federal meat inspectors stationed at slaughter houses across the country. Thirty states have their own inspectors in addition to the federal inspectors, who handle all meat bound for interstate commerce.

Routine inspection, performed at packing and slaughter plants, covers all fresh foods crossing state lines. (Inspection is voluntary for food remaining within a state.)

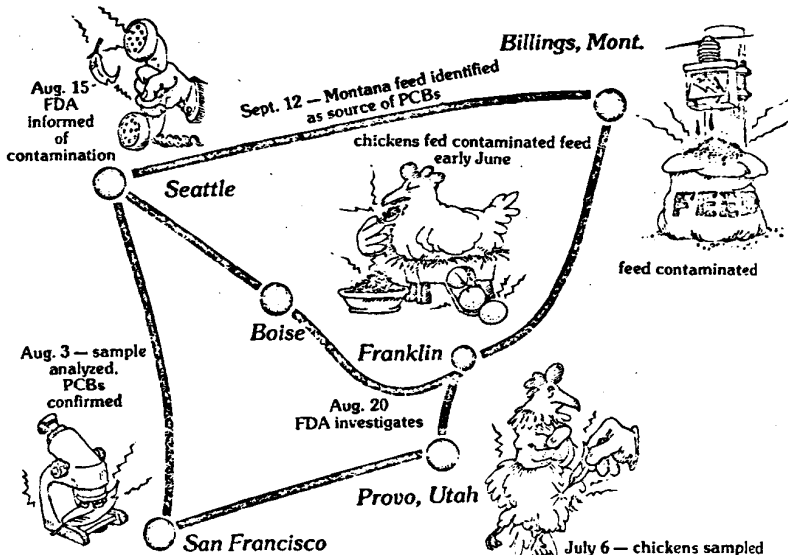
Federal meat and produce inspection remains a primitive process. Meat and poultry inspectors manually examine the heart, lungs, kidneys, livers, cricoids and meat of each slaughtered animal as it moves through a packing house. Fruits, vegetables and eggs are examined in the same way.

The USDA says only 1 percent of all meat fails routine inspection. But some foods have an additional hurdle to overcome. They are also tested for 10 chemicals called "residues." Residues, including PCBs, DDT, antacids and antibiotics, must fall below established levels to pass inspection.

Residue tests are done at packing plants on a random, computer-selected basis. Plants are tested again from twice a year to twice a month.

The PCBs in the recent contamination were detected by a Provo, Utah, poultry slaughter plant. In June such random test performed July 6, the first that had been taken there in months of their own period, had reported.

Some wondered whether PCBs would have gone undetected if the plant had not been scheduled for the



random sampling. And could the contamination have occurred, but we don't detect, before July 6?

Yes, said USDA Food Safety and Quality Services head Carol Tucker Foreman, to both questions. Foreman, former director of the Consumer Federation of America and a frequent critic of food production methods, feels the PCB incident points up the inadequacy of residual testing.

"We know our residue detection system isn't very good. What you're seeing this week is an example," Foreman said.

She said the agency is concerned about the 10 chemicals it can't detect. Inspection officials can't say much about those substances, which include pesticides and animal medication, except to note the hazard posed by them depends on the dose received.

Others argue the random system worked well in the PCB case, and that contaminations occur too infrequently to justify the costly proposition of testing every animal slaughtered.

"It showed the system worked, and we were able to pick it up on a random basis," said Dr. Ronald Prucha, Field Operations Director for the USDA Meat and Poultry inspection division in Washington. But Prucha agreed, "We just haven't reached that point in science and technology to assure every animal is residue free."

Residues have become an increasing problem with burgeoning chemical use in modern industry. While science has made strides toward keeping food disease-free, Foreman says chemical proliferation creates a dilemma in food quality control.

"We check very, very far downstream

that don't come very often, but we don't check very well for those problems which are becoming more of a concern," she said.

Because of the speed and complexity of food production today, food problems are both less likely to occur and more dangerous when they do. By hastening food through processing procedures decrease the chance of spoiling. Problems are more likely to be spotted, because the food is scrutinized at every stage.

Yet, food is distributed so quickly and into so many far-reaching channels that it is hard to stem the spread of a problem.

Yet, Foreman suggests the real danger is in those "black boxes," those pesticides, antibiotics and slaughter that are not detectable.

Ever the time being, the undetectable chemicals are ignored.

But the USDA is trying to broaden

its detection to include the processing chemicals, and hopes to develop standards.

"We have to have very good tests so we can detect problems and stop food products from going any further," Foreman said.

The current USDA policy calls for increasing reliance on private companies to do much of the testing. That seems like a good idea, considering the fact Campbell's Soup, Peppercorn Farms and Swift Co. collected PCBs from the current contamination.

"Our inspections are more stringent than the government, and I think you find that throughout the food industry," said Campbell's spokesman Scott Rumbach.

"When you've got a quality image to maintain, you have to go over a product that nobody else would."