Latest Health Hazard

The latest conflict between environmental and public health goals has arisen in disclosures by the Food and Drug Administration that it has found dangerous chemical contamination of certain foods. The chemical involved is PCB [polychlorinated biphenyls], a highly toxic, extremely persistent compound used in a variety of household and industrial products. Some authorities fear PCB may be as much a threat to the environment as DDT.

The FDA found unacceptably high levels of this chemical in unnamed brands of shredded wheat and noodles, and it is testing a number of other foods. All of the foods being tested are packaged in boxes made of recycled paper, which has been found to contain PCB. The FDA has traced the PCB in recycled paper mainly to the "carbonless" carbon paper often used in business forms.

Soon after all this became known to the public, the FDA announced that the nation's only industrial producer of PCB had promised to stop selling the chemical to processors of foods and live stock feeds. Foods apparently were the source of PCB residues found in thousands of chickens, turkeys and eggs since last July. Companies which recycle paper have also agreed to screen "carbonless" paper out of their mills, according to the FDA.

In the midst of all this, Charles C. Edwards, FDA commissioner, charged "alarmists seeking headlines" with having blown the PCB problem out of proportion. If that is the case, perhaps the FDA shares some of the blame for not laying the facts on the line as soon as they were known. It reportedly sat on information concerning PCB residues in packaging materials and foods for more than three weeks, finally convening a secret meeting to discuss the problem before the public got wind of it.

This incident in some respects parallels that of phosphate substitutes in detergents. The government encouraged the use of the substitutes as a means of reducing the harmful environmental effects of phosphates, only to learn later that many of the substitutes were hazardous to human health.

The government likewise encouraged the use of recycled paper for packaging and other purposes to reduce waste and litter. Now it is forced to backtrack. We're in favor of cleaning up the environment, but the public interest would be better served if the government were not so hasty in jumping at recommendations before the scientists have had a reasonable opportunity to check all the ramifications.

Chicago Tribune October 10, 1971

MONS 033622