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High levels of insecticide, PCB found in Triana's 600 residents

BY BARBARA REYNOLDS
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TRIANA — Government scientists have found high levels of DDT and an unexpected toxic chemical — PCB — in testing the 600 residents of this north Alabama community near a creek heavily contaminated with the insecticide.

Dr. Kathleen Kreiss, an epidemiologist at the Atlanta Center for Disease Control, described the situation as "unique" and the discovery of PCB in blood samples as "a surprise."

"We don't know of any community in this nation that has ever been contaminated like this," said Dr. Kreiss. Results of the DDT testing were to be released this weekend, but the results of the PCB testing are not yet complete.

Several scientists compared the PCB situation in Triana to a 1968 incident in Japan, where a group of 1,000 people became seriously ill after eating rice oil containing high concentrations of the chemical.

This community's health problems came to light in November 1978, when the mayor was tipped off that fish in Indian Creek were heavily contaminated with DDT.

The insecticide was later traced to a chemical plant on a nearby Army missile base, which was closed in 1971 because of the large number of fish killed. During World War II the plant was used to make nerve and mustard gas for chemical warfare.

FOR DECADES, residents used the creek for their water and food supply.

Both DDT and PCB have been banned by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and are suspected of causing cancer. However, scientists say the potential health hazard of PCB is far greater because of its effects on the skin, liver and reproductive organs.

Dr. Samuel Epstein, an environmental scientist at the University of Illinois, said that the combination of PCB and DDT is "a matter of great concern" and could have a "multiplier effect."

PCB studies by government scientists — so far the tests are not yet complete on all residents — show a contamination level nearly five times higher than normal.

A scientist at the Center for Disease Control said the source of the PCB is a mystery since fish samples from Indian Creek did not show large concentrations of the chemical.

"There's some dispute over the fish and maybe the wrong fish were tested," he said.

DDT tests on the community's 600 residents disclosed blood levels of the insecticide nearly five times higher than the national average.

Of the 600 tested, government statistics indicate that 162 had DDT levels 10 times higher than the average; 33 were 30 times higher, and 6 were 60 times higher.

The center's report also disclosed that residents with high levels of DDT also had high levels of cholesterol — a substance often linked to heart disease.

Dr. Kreiss said, blood samples from those with high DDT levels also contained a substance which makes the liver work harder to expel the DDT.

"This means the liver is acting much like it would if alcohol or tranquilizers were present," she said. "It's cranking up but that doesn't necessarily mean there is liver damage."

ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT finding in the report shows that older residents have higher DDT levels than younger ones, which Dr. Kreiss said shows that the body doesn't eliminate the chemical effectively.

Commenting on the presence of DDT and PCB in Triana blood samples, Dr. Kreiss said: "There are no studies on people who are contaminated with both. It is unfortunate that this happened but now that it has, we will just have to do a lot of experiments to see what lessons can be learned."

Dr. Kreiss will be making house calls in Triana this weekend, going from door to door to try and explain what it all means.

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