

Thousands of chickens killed after tainted feed is found

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thousands of chickens have been destroyed and many more may be because for the last year a Ralston Purina Co. subsidiary has been distributing contaminated fish meal which was fed to the chickens, the Food and Drug Administration said Wednesday.

The feed was contaminated by polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) during a warehouse fire in Puerto Rico a year ago, said Nancy Glick, a spokesman for the FDA. But the FDA learned of it only recently.

SHE SAID THE contaminated fish meal may have been mixed in swine or other animal feeds in addition to poultry feed, and the FDA does not yet know if any pet food is involved.

Most of the contaminated feed appears to have been shipped to Texas, although at least some has turned up in Idaho and Arkansas, she said.

"We don't know how many chickens or eggs were sold before it was discovered," she said. "We know several hundred thousand chickens containing excessive PCB levels have had to be destroyed, and eggs from contaminated laying hens are being destroyed daily."

PCBS ARE HIGHLY stable chemicals that were used extensively for many years in insulators and other electrical equipment. As a result of their heavy industrial use, they have become persistent environmental contaminants that get into the food chain and turn up in the fat tissues of many animals, especially fish.

Consumption of large doses by humans can cause acne-like skin eruptions, darkening of the skin and nails, excessive discharge from the eyes and swelling of the eyelids, the FDA spokesman said. But such symptoms should not be experienced by people who have consumed the contaminants in the quantities found in poultry and eggs so far, she said.

The FDA says it is impossible to eliminate PCBs from all foods because they occur throughout the environment, but it has set maximum tolerance levels at various points in the food chain.

FINISHED ANIMAL feed may not contain more than 0.2 parts per million of the contaminant, while animal feed components may contain up to 2 parts per million.

FDA investigators said analysis of some of the feed showed levels up to 62 parts per million, more than 30 times the permissible level.

FDA investigators learned from a poultry company in Texas Jan. 8 that it

had found excessive PCB contamination in the fat tissue of its chickens.

BY TRACING THE various ingredients of the poultry feed given to the chickens, FDA investigators were able to pinpoint the source of the contamination.

They said that during the warehouse fire in April 1977, two electrical transformers exploded, spraying 2,000 pounds of coolant made with PCBs over 400 tons of tuna meal stored in bags in the warehouse.

The FDA said the meal was manufactured by the Van Camp Division of National Packing Co., a subsidiary of the St. Louis-based Ralston Purina.

(A spokesman for Ralston Purina told The Globe-Democrat that the fish meal in question "has all been destroyed or withdrawn from the market. None of the fish meal was used in Purina chow animal feeds.")

(The spokesman said that as soon as the company became aware of the PCB contamination in early February, "it voluntarily notified FDA and USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) and began procedures to locate and dispose of the affected fish meal."

("Corrective measures were immediately taken to alleviate any potential problems and all affected customers have been contacted.")

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