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'Alarmists' Accused

FDA Belittles PCB Scare

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WASHINGTON — Leading federal food, health and environmental officials sought yesterday to calm public concern over the possible hazards of PCB (polychlorinated biphyenlys), the chemical contaminant related to DDT.

Dr. Charles C. Edwards, head of the Food and Drug Adminstration, said public confusion about PCB "is compounded by a few alarmists seeking headlines . . . aided and abetted by unbalanced reporting." He called PCB "a potential but not immediate health hazard."

The agency released data collected over the last 22 months showing that the chemical had been found in only 501 of 15,720 food samples. Over half the contaminated samples were fish.

Many of the other tainted samples had been packed in boxes made from recycled cardboard, reprocessed from waste paper. The use of this material for packaging food ceased three months ago, FDA officials said.

Edwards said some restriction on PCB might be considered but added, "An outright ban is not feasible."

When asked why a ban was not possible in the United States when one has existed in Great Britain since March, he and his deputies expressed amazement that it had been in effect there. The British action was taken following the deaths through PCB contamination of tons of thousands of fish and marine birds.

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