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USDA worker's vacation slows PCB detection

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The Idaho Statesman

Detection of toxic PCBs in chickens and eggs from an eastern Idaho egg company was slowed for 10 days while a U.S. Departmental of Agriculture worker went on vacation, The Statesman has learned.

USDA Staff Assistant Dr. Norman Pang of the agency's Alameda, Calif., office said a department inspector left contaminated chicken samples in a Provo, Utah, office refrigerator July 6 while he went on vacation. On July 16 the samples were mailed to San Francisco, where analysts found unacceptable levels of PCBs, a carcinogenic oil additive whose manufacture and use were banned earlier this year by the Environmental Protection Agency.

That lapse was only one of the delays that have drawn sharp criticism from Gov. John Evans and from farmers whose eggs were contaminated by PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls).

Evans lashed out at the Food and Drug Administration Friday for waiting until Sept. 3 before notifying the state that PCBs had turned up in chickens and eggs at a southeastern Idaho poultry farm. Owners of the farm, the Ritewood Egg Co. of Franklin, say they are angry that officials waited until Aug. 29 to inspect their eggs, 26 days after USDA tests confirmed the presence of PCBs in the farm's chickens. The PCBs have been traced to a transformer that leaked into animal feed at the Pierce Packing Co. in Billings, Mont.

Ritewood attorney Lowell Castleton said the company is investigating the possibility that government officials may be liable for some of the farm's losses because of the delay.

Pang and Dr. Michael Nusias, staff officer of the Western regional office of the USDA Inspection Division in Alameda, blamed further delays in the PCB notification on busy labs, slow mails and a juggling of responsibility between federal and state agencies.

From conversations with Huber and Nusias, The Statesman has constructed the following chronology:

- July 6 — Chickens are sampled at the Jolly Poultry Co. slaughter plant in Provo, Utah. Samples are left in a refrigerator while inspector goes on vacation.
- July 16 — Samples are mailed to San Francisco, headquarters for USDA meat analysis, and received July 20.
- July 25 — Testing begins on samples.
- Aug. 3 — Test results show 12.65 parts per million, more than 4 times above the acceptable FDA level. Pang learns of results by phone.
- Aug. 15 — Pang telephones James Davis, FDA Seattle office to inform him of PCB findings.
- Aug. 16 — USDA sends notification letters to Ritewood Egg Co. in Franklin, where Jolly chickens originated; to the EPA; to the Idaho Department of Agriculture; and to the Idaho state veterinarian. The letter advise of the lab findings and inform Ritewood that further shipments would be tested and held if found to contain PCBs.
- Aug. 29 — The FDA begins its investigation by sending staff to Ritewood to sample eggs, feed and water.
- Sept. 3 — Lab results show PCB levels in eggs of 2.5 parts per million, nearly 10 times above the legal limit. Ritewood suspends sales.
- Sept. 10 — Oakdell Farms, Riverton, Utah, begins retrieving from Salt Lake City supermarkets 300 dozen eggs laid by a contaminated chicken flock.
- Sept. 11 — FDA tells reporters it did not publicize the egg problem because it "didn't want to create a panic."
- Sept. 14 — FDA confirms contamination in chickens from Cherry Lane Farms and Montana Farms, both in Montana, and in poultry products at the Campbells' Soup Co. in Washington, Minn., the Swift Co. in Clinton, Iowa, and Pepperidge Farms in Richmond, Utah.

Pang said the delay in sending the samples to San Francisco was "longer than normal." But he said the samples were "not the first priority" because they were taken in routine tests and were not known to be contaminated with PCBs.

State Health Officer Dr. Ed Gallagher, Boise, said earlier that people would have to eat 3 or 4 dozen eggs a day to be affected by the PCBs. "The health risk at this point is based on calculations. There are no sick animals or humans," he said.

Pang said the USDA takes about 120 "residual" tests daily at meat plants across the country that are selected randomly. All results are analyzed in San Francisco.

Nusias said the San Francisco lab was "overloaded." He said notification was delayed by difficulties in locating the name and address of the chicken producer.

Nusias said it is not the job of the USDA to make public its PCB findings.

"We don't notify the public. We just notify other agencies," he said.

None of the agencies notified in the Aug. 16 letter made a public announcement.

Idaho Department of Agriculture Director Wilson Kellogg said he turned the matter over to the Department of Health and Welfare.

"Our prime mission is animal health. Public health is public health's problem," Kellogg said.

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