PCB level in Franklin mothers' milk called safe

Statesman News Services

Breast milk samples taken from residents of the Franklin area show safe levels of PCB, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare said Friday.

Milk and blood testing began for area residents after PCB contamination was found at a Franklin poultry farm. PCB, a cancer-causing chemical, was banned in this country several months ago.

Breast milk samples were obtained from 8 nursing mothers late last month. State health officials said the samples showed PCB levels from 2 to 75 parts per billion. The average background level in milk from nursing mothers nationwide is 60 parts per billion.

Millions of eggs and most of the chickens at the Franklin farm were destroyed because of the contamination.

State Health Officer Dr. Edward Gallagher said 169 blood samples from Franklin-area residents showed safe levels of PCB. All blood samples showed under 3 parts per billion. Levels up to 20 parts per billion are considered safe.

In Washington, D.C., Assistant Agriculture Secretary Carol Tucker Foreman said testing of meat, egg products and other foods since mid-September indicates PCB contamination from a packing company in Montana has been contained.

She added that excessive levels of PCBs generally have not made it to the food chain for nearly a month.

Intensive testing will continue until officials are convinced controls can prevent slaughter of contaminated animals, Foreman said.

At the same time as Foreman's announcement, Montana health officials said illegal levels of the toxic chemical PCB have been found in the eggs of nearly one-third of the Montana producers tested so far.

Vern Sloulin, chief of the Food and Consumer Safety Bureau of the Health Department, said illegal PCB levels were found in the eggs of 13 out of 39 producers tested so far.

Sloulin said all 13 producers have been told not to market the eggs.

Two of the companies on the list have already destroyed chickens and eggs contaminated with PCB. There was no immediate word on what has become of the products of the other producers, which included 8 Hutterite agricultural colonies.

Although they are still testing some 415,000 live chickens, Washington state Department of Agriculture officials say they're sure they've diverted all PCB-contaminated food destined for human food in the state.

"We are sure there is no further danger of any getting into the food supply," said Agriculture Director Bob J. Michelson in a news conference Friday.

The main problem, Michelson said, is that while the tests go on, the chickens are still being fed and are growing bigger than they should be for market.

On Wednesday, the department destroyed 9,960 processed chickens from Fors Farms in the Puyallup area found to have PCB levels higher than allowable limits. A group of 12,500 live chickens still on the farm and destined for market were also destroyed under department supervision, Michelson said.

After PCB contamination was spotted in July and traced to animal feed, hundreds of thousands of pounds of meat and poultry and eggs were destroyed or held back from consumers.

Contamination of feed and food by PCB — polychlorinated biphenyl — spread to at least 10 states after accidental leakage of PCB from a transformer into the water supply at Pierce Packing Co. in Billings, Mont.

Banned in 1976, PCB's are still found in millions of electrical transformers. They have been linked to cancer in test animals.

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