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FDA Defends Handling Of Chemical, Opposes Call for Outright Ban

Substances Called PCBs, Made Only by Monsanto, Have Caused Concern Over Possible Hazards

By a Wall Street Journal Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON — Food and Drug Administration officials defended their handling of the problem of PCBs, a widespread environmental contaminant, and opposed an outright ban on the chemical.

Dr. Charles Edwards, FDA commissioner, argued that unnecessary consumer confusion and alarm have arisen about the potential hazards of the chemical, which has been found in eggs, poultry and several packaged-food products.

"We are taking specific, adequate and positive steps to deal with whatever problem, or potential problem, that PCBs are likely to pose to human health," Dr. Edwards told a news conference. "We reject the need and, in fact, the feasibility, as some have proposed, for an outright ban on the substances. Although the use of PCBs requires control, an outright ban isn't feasible and wouldn't be in the best interest of the consumer," he added.

PCBs or polychloride biphenyls, are a class of industrial compounds manufactured in the U.S. only by Monsanto Co. They are widely used as a heat-exchange medium and for other industrial purposes because of their favorable properties, which include lack of flammability.

But since 1966, the substances have been detected as an environmental contaminant. PCBs, much like the pesticide DDT to which they are closely related, are persistent and relatively impervious to heat, chemicals and other forms of biological breakdown. They have been shown in laboratory tests with animals to cause liver damage and other adverse effects at high-dose levels. But the dangers of long-term chronic exposure to humans, at low levels, isn't clearly known.

Dr. Edwards and other FDA officials insisted that PCBs don't pose any immediate health hazard. They argued that the agency is taking the required steps to minimize the presence of the compounds in the food chain and reduce the exposure of consumers.

"Based on the levels of PCBs we have found in our scientific evaluation of the health hazard, except for accident-type situations, we don't have an imminent health hazard problem; but PCBs are a potential hazard," James Grant, deputy FDA commissioner, stated.

Mr. Grant said Monsanto was no longer selling PCBs for use in the food industry and was taking steps to replace them with other substances. The company will continue to market PCBs for industrial applications, particularly in transformers and other electrical equipment that are totally closed and can be made leak-proof, the FDA said. One federal expert said these applications constitute about 85% of PCBs' use.

FDA officials argued that substitution of other substances for PCBs, particularly in electrical equipment, could pose undue hazards, particularly from the risk of fire. "They have important flame-resistant properties and, properly used, directly assist government and industry in protecting the consumer against fire," Dr. Edwards declared.

The FDA disclosed it had detected PCBs in 470 of a total of 15,000 raw agricultural commodities sampled. Most of these were fish and levels ranged from 0.01 parts per million to three parts per million. The agency has set a safety margin of less than five parts per million for PCBs in fish and poultry; less than 0.5 parts per million in eggs; and less than 0.2 parts per million in milk. These levels are more stringent for foods consumed by infants and children.

A second FDA survey of foods purchased by the consumer in the marketplace turned up PCBs at levels ranging from trace amounts to 0.38 parts per million in 60 of 720 samples. Most of the problem was in meat, poultry and fish.

More recently, the agency found the chemical as a contaminant in 36 of 80 samples of packaged foods at levels ranging from trace amounts to three parts per million. Foods included spaghetti and noodle dinners, and rice, grits and various cereals.

The agency said it wouldn't specify individual products, because the spot checking was random and the health hazard unproven.

However, the agency is continuing a more exhaustive survey of PCBs in packaged goods that it hopes to conclude by November. Then, if some products show consistently high levels, warnings might be issued, an FDA official said.

But the FDA argued that much more must be known about the extent of the PCB problem in packaged food before regulatory action is taken. The chemical has been traced to the packaging material, itself, a form of reprocessed paper. One major source of contamination in reprocessed paper, carbonless carbon paper that contains PCBs to hold the ink, is being eliminated by the paper manufacturers. But the FDA experts note the PCBs are so widely distributed in the environment that other sources may contribute to the contamination of packaging materials.

Technically, PCBs are banned from packaging materials as a toxic substance under FDA regulations. But agency experts said this restriction, which could require the removal of such packaging materials from the market, isn't being enforced.

The current survey of the extent of contamination of packaged products will help the agency decide whether to enforce this requirement or, perhaps, set guidelines for the amounts of PCBs that can be contained in packaging materials.

A key issue is the extent to which the chemical migrates from the paper into the food. One possible solution would be to require that companies insert a PCB-free barrier on wrapping paper between the packaging material and the food product.

But it's clear the FDA has decided to avoid precipitate action. Dr. Albert C. Kolbye Jr., deputy director of the agency's Bureau of Foods, insisted that consumer exposure to foods containing as much as five parts per million of PCBs is infrequent and sporadic. "To our knowledge, we aren't aware of any foods contaminated at significant levels on a regular and consistent basis," he said.

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