FDA Proposal Establishes Temporary PCB Tolerances in Feed, Food Products

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WASHINGTON — The Food & Drug Administration has established a temporary tolerance of 0.5 ppm. for polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in finished feeds in a proposal published in the March 18 Federal Register. The proposed temporary tolerance for specific feed ingredients, such as fish meal and meat scraps, is 5 ppm. If PCB residues in finished feeds are no higher than 0.5 ppm., according to FDA, residues in poultry meat should be well below the proposed tolerance of 5 ppm. in the fat.

Other PCB tolerances proposed were 2.5 ppm. for milk (fat base), 0.5 ppm. in eggs, 5 ppm. in the edible portion of fish, 0.1 ppm. in infant food and 5 ppm. in food packaging.

FDA's investigation into the incidence of PCBs in foods has shown that, "except for avoidable industrial accidents and practices, PCB contamination of animal feeds is not a significant problem," according to the agency.

FDA recently took 1,274 samples of feed manufactured for various livestock and poultry species, and found 4.4% were positive for PCBs. However, only one or two feed samples had residues as high as the proposed tolerance of 0.5 ppm., according to James O. Gesling, head of the compliance division at the Bureau of Veterinary Medicine, FDA. Background levels of PCBs do not seem to be a problem, he said. Gesling added that the principal problem was with industrial accidents. Of 515 samples of broiler feeds checked, 16 were positive for PCB. Gesling advised feed men at this week's Maryland nutrition conference to look for PCB residues in their operations.

He said that in the recent outbreak of PCB contamination among broilers in Maine PCB residues in complete feeds ran as high as 578 ppm. He described the Maine episode as a "one-shot situation" with the feed problem apparently existing for a day or so around Jan. 25, and current sampling showing negative or very low levels of PCBs. To date, 1.4 million broilers have been destroyed because of the contamination. Any bird with 5 ppm. of PCB in the enteric fat is being condemned.

The agency still does not know the source of the feed contamination, and is continuing its investigation. Gesling said the situation was similar to the Minnesota turkey feed problems of last fall, where the specific source of the trouble was never determined. He noted that in the case involving contamination by PCBs of broilers and layers in the Southeast last July-August, FDA was able to determine almost immediately that the PCB source was fish meal originating from a processing plant where PCBs leaked from a heat exchange unit.

No specific ingredients in the Maine case have been found high in PCBs. The trouble was found only in the complete feeds. Responding to a question, the compliance officer said FDA does not have authority over use of heat exchange fluids and oils, but that it can and will "exert pressure" when necessary.

In announcing the proposed new regulations governing PCB residues, Dr. Charles C. Edwards, FDA commissioner, pointed out that although it is not possible for FDA to remove PCBs from the environment, the agency can, and is, taking all steps within its authority to limit exposure to PCBs from food. "We do not believe that current food levels present a hazard to public health," said Edwards. "We do believe, however, that the sources of PCBs in foods can and should be significantly reduced to prevent any potential hazard

(Turn to PCB, page 84)

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PCB

(Continued from page 6)

from developing."

FDA Proposal

FDA's proposal, as outlined in the Federal Register, would deal with known problem areas by:

1. Eliminating all sources of direct, accidental PCB contamination during the handling, processing and storage of feed, food and packaging material. FDA does not want PCBs to be used in equipment where feed or food ingredients are processed, handled or stored.

2. Prohibiting from the recycling process, deliberate or avoidable inclusion of pulp that contains any poisonous or deleterious substance which might migrate to food.

3. Setting temporary tolerances for a sufficient period of time for unavoidable PCB residues in food packaging materials and certain foods. Such tolerances are being set, FDA said, because it is not now possible to totally eliminate PCBs caused by environmental or industrial contamination.

PCB Background

PCBs have been produced since 1929, and have had a wide range of uses. The substances have or are being used as heat exchange liquids, as dielectrics, in lubricants and hydraulic fluids, and as ingredients in paints, plastics, resins, inks, waxes, adhesives, rubber, asphalt and various building materials. This widespread usage, combined with the highly stable and persistent qualities of the substances, have resulted in the occasional appearance of PCBs in the food supply.

PCBs were found in 67% of the food packaging tested by FDA. They were found in both recycled paper and virgin stock. However, only 19% of the foods in these packages contained PCBs, with an average concentration of 0.1 ppm. Subsequent surveys show a continuing and substantial reduction of PCBs in packaging material.

Investigations show the presence of PCB residues in fresh water fish and in some food animals. The source of these residues is attributed in part to environmental contamination, such as discharges of PCB waste effluents into water and air.

Interested persons have 60 days to comment on the proposal by writing to the Hearing Clerk, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Room 6-88, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, Md. 20852. #