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Monsanto to boost biomedical research

Monsanto is negotiating with potential Canadian partners to expand its biomedical research effort. Plans for a long-range, cooperative research project were disclosed last week in Toronto by Monsanto president John W. Hanley in a speech before a joint meeting of the Canadian Research Management Assn. and the Industrial Research Institute.

Monsanto says the negotiations involve the eventual setting up of a long-range general research effort, rather than a one-time investigation of a particular drug or chemical.

Monsanto's successful association with the University of Toronto and with Toronto General Hospital in the study of the potential cancer treatment drug NED 137 (*CW, Aug. 1, p. 29*) prompted the move. But the company will not divulge its potential partners.

The company calls the effort a new "research thrust," but adds that it is not an attempt to go into pharmaceutical manufacturing or marketing. As an example of this new research emphasis, Monsanto notes that Howard A. Schneiderman, who heads its research and development effort, has a biomedical background.

The planned Canadian cooperation, Monsanto insists, is still too vague to outline. The company would not say if it involves building a new facility or research institute in Canada. But Hanley said, "While the precise scale and character of the operation have yet to be determined, discussions have reached an advanced stage." The company hopes to begin by mid-1980. □

Monsanto's Hanley boosts biomedical research.



THANKSGIVING TREAT: TURKEYS FREE OF PCB

After 7 Weeks, the Authorities Say Inquiry Into Leakage of Toxic Chemical Is All but Over

By GLADWIN HILL
Special to The New York Times

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 7 — After a seven-week inquiry involving hundreds of investigators, the Federal authorities are reasonably certain that no turkeys containing the toxic chemical PCB will end up on Thanksgiving tables.

However, repercussions from an accidental spill of the substance at a Billings, Mont., meat-packing plant last June have not ended. One consequence of the spill involves a Japanese freighter with a cargo of contaminated animal fat that is reportedly roaming the South Pacific, looking for a place to unload it.

PCB, or polychlorinated biphenyl, is an almost indestructible chemical used principally as an insulator in electrical transformers. A suspected carcinogen that even in minute quantities can have severe adverse effects on human and animal health, it was conditionally banned under the Toxic Substance Control Act of 1976. However, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, 750 million tons of the substance is still in use in industrial equipment.

How Spill Occurred

Two hundred gallons of PCB was released when a fork lift bumped into a transformer at the Pierce Packing Company in Billings. It went into a drain carrying slaughtering residues used in making farm feeds and tallow, large quantities of which were shipped before the contamination was discovered.

Officials of the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Agriculture estimated this week that the contaminated materials had got to 1,400 primary and secondary recipients — food producers and processors — from coast to coast.

One of the biggest shipments was one of tons of animal fat that went to a rendering plant in Seattle. Some of this was resold as a feed supplement to two turkey farms near Salem, Ore., which are among hundreds in four Western states that are affiliated with Norbest, a national marketing cooperative. The cooperative accounts for 7 percent of the national dressed turkey business.

Some Presumably Eaten

Only 1,420 turkeys from these farms got to retail outlets, according to Federal agencies. They were distributed fresh to stores in Oregon and Northern California and presumably were eaten. An official in the Agriculture Department said that tests of associated birds had found that they contained no more than 3.4 parts per million of PCB, barely above the regulatory limit for poultry of three parts per million.

farms fed before the contamination was discovered have been impounded, either before or after slaughter.

Hundreds of thousands of chickens that received the tainted feed at a dozen major poultry raising establishments in Western states have been destroyed. The slaughter of a flock of 50,000 at a farm at Puyallup, Wash., last week was believed to represent the last outstanding case of large-scale contamination.

Eggs Ordered Destroyed

Meanwhile, Food and Drug inspectors tracked down scores of instances in which eggs from contaminated chickens had got into commercial channels and ordered the eggs or products made from them destroyed.

In late September, the agency made a special survey of retail food stores in six of the most exposed states, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Montana, North Dakota and Minnesota.

Seven things were checked: chickens, poultry products, eggs, bacon and sausages, mayonnaise, egg noodles and bakery products. Out of 434 samples, excessive PCB levels were found in only three samples of eggs, the agency reported.

PCB is so persistent and ubiquitous — 150 million pounds are believed dispersed throughout the environment — that most people have some in their systems. Lethal thresholds have not been determined. In smaller amounts, the most common ailments caused by the substance are skin irritations and liver trouble.

Inquiry 'Virtually Completed'

Spokesmen for the Agriculture Department and the Food and Drug Administration in Washington said in telephone interviews this week that the investigation of all the ramifications of the PCB leakage was considered "virtually completed."

"We think we traced out all the possible routes of distribution of the contaminated products, and that there are no more out there that we don't know about," said William Rados of the Food and Drug Administration.

Under the law, the Agriculture Department is responsible for the purity of poultry and meat and the Food and Drug Administration for other food products. In this case, the two agencies pursued a virtually joint investigation.

The principal shipment of tallow from the Billings plant went to the Seattle Rendering Works. There, a Japanese freighter, the Fujisuki Maru, took on 660,000 pounds and sailed for Japan Oct. 15.

Later Tests Cited

Subsequent tests of the storage tanks showed PCB levels up to 255 parts to a million. Any concentration of more than 50 parts per million comes under the jurisdiction of the Environmental Protection Agency.

That agency's Seattle office said that it had been informed that the Japanese authorities had refused to allow the ship to unload the cargo, and that its owners, the Mitsubishi Company, wanted to send it back to Seattle.

However, John Hamill, a lawyer with the environmental agency, said that the rendering company had been advised that the law forbade the entry into the United States Customs territory of anything containing more than 50 parts per million of PCB.

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