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Chickens Fed Tainted Meal Termed Safe

By Hank Burchard
Washington Post Staff Writer

Tests on chickens fed contaminated fish meal have found none so far that contain enough chemical residue to be considered dangerous, the Agriculture Department announced yesterday.

The department is checking chickens raised by growers in 10 states, including Virginia and Delaware, who purchased meal accidentally contaminated with PCB, a toxic chemical similar to DDT.

Only birds slaughtered since July 23 are being tested. Frozen and canned chickens and products made with chickens slaughtered before then, containing unknown amounts of PCB, have not been and apparently will not be recalled for testing.

This means the government can assure consumers that fresh chickens bought in any market since July 23 contain less than 5 parts per million of PCB, probably far less.

But the government cannot say how much PCB was in chickens sold fresh in May, June or early July, and knows nothing about the levels of PCB that may be in soup, TV dinners, chicken pot pies or other processed food produced during that time.

However, major manufacturers of such products maintain their own testing laboratories and say they test all incoming poultry for a wide range of contaminants such as DDT and PCB.

What harm PCB may cause humans is not known, but it causes low fertility and other damage to birds and animals. Because it persists in the environment and accumulates in fatty tissues, it is regarded as a serious long-term hazard. No government agency requires regular tests for PCB in marketed products.

It was the Campbell Soup Co., for instance, that last December detected PCB in chickens raised in New York, a discovery that led to the destruction of 146,000 chickens.

"Contaminated substances did not then, have not now and never will get past our laboratories," a Campbell spokesman said yesterday.

Another leading American food processing company said yesterday it had found PCB in a recent shipment of chickens and had refused to accept the birds.

"The government may set 5 p.p.m. of PCB as an acceptable level, but we set our tolerance at zero," a company spokesman said.

Since July 23, an Agriculture Department announcement said yesterday, PCB residues have been found in about 70 per cent of the chickens slaughtered by growers who received the contaminated chicken feed. The feed was made with fish meal from a Wilmington, N.C., plant whose sterilising equipment leaked the chemical into heating vats.

However, according to Dr. Fred Fullerton, chief of the department's meat and poultry inspection division, most of the samples showed only traces of PCB. The highest level found in 130 tests completed by noon yesterday was 1.4 p.p.m., he said.

The 5 p.p.m. permissibility standard, an "interim figure" set by the Food and Drug Administration, has been attacked by a New York congressman as "a figure pulled out of thin air."

Rep. William Fitts Ryan, who has a pending bill that would ban PCB in the United States, said the government should allow no PCB-contaminated product to be marketed "at least until some solid scientific basis has been established for a tolerance level."

Because low levels of PCB have been found since July 23, the department implied that chickens sold before that time probably contained similarly low levels.

"All the evidence indicated that consumers have been buying a wholesome product and can continue to buy and enjoy chicken with confidence," said Dr. Clayton Yuetter, administrator of Agriculture's consumer marketing survey.

However, no official was prepared to assert that high levels of PCB did not exist in the many millions of chickens sold before a private grower discovered the contamination.

Customers who questioned supermarket employees in the Washington area yesterday were told all poultry being sold was "fine" but in some instances were advised not to buy chicken if they were worried by the newspaper stories. However, supermarket officials said few customers had asked about possibly contaminated chicken.

Most chains here have liberal policies permitting return of food, and officials in Safeway, Giant and several other chains said yesterday they will accept return of chickens from customers who are concerned about contamination.

A spokesman for the National Association of Food Chains, which embraces all major supermarkets, said yesterday there had been no noticeable decline in chicken sales since July 23.

"There is a summer slump in chicken anyway," he said. "For some reason most people stop buying chicken from the Fourth of July until cool weather."

Marketers' chief chicken worry right now, he said, is that the railroad strike has cut off chicken feed shipments.

"Starting next week there will be incredible numbers of chickens slaughtered because otherwise they would starve," he said.

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