FDA to Propose Tighter Limits on PCBs In Effort to Cut Potential Health Hazard

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WASHINGTON — The Food and Drug Administration soon will propose significant restrictions on polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, an important industrial chemical deemed to pose potential health dangers.

The agency, worried about PCBs contaminating food and food packaging, intends to establish new limits on the amount of PCBs these products may contain. Moreover, to prevent such contamination, the FDA also will propose banning most industrial uses of the chemical in plants that process or make food, feed or packaging materials.

PCBs are made in the U.S. only by Monsanto Co. They are used widely in electrical equipment as heat transfer agents and in various other industrial applications because of their conducting properties and lack of flammability. However, the chemical persists in the environment after use, and high doses have damaged test animals' livers. Scientists are unsure of its risks to humans at low levels and with long-term exposure, but are eager to minimize any possible hazard.

The new FDA proposal probably will call for limits on PCBs in baby foods and poultry, as well as packaging, and reaffirm existing restrictions in other foods. The ban on food-related factory use would formalize restrictions Monsanto is applying voluntarily, so it probably won't reduce further the company's PCB sales. The restrictions would rule out the chemicals' use in heat exchangers, as a lubricant, in hydraulic fluids and for other purposes except in electrical systems where PCBs can't leak out and contaminate other materials.

Limits on Packaging

One of the chief issues is the restrictions on packaging materials and packaged food. Last fall, PCB levels ranging up to 433 parts per million were found in food packaging made from recycled paper. Much of the contamination was found to result from the chemicals' use in carbonless carbon paper, which then was recycled into packaging materials. This use has been discontinued. But FDA experts say PCB levels ranging up to 10 parts per million have been found in virgin pulp.

The FDA feared the chemical might migrate from the packaging into the foods. While the contamination level found last fall in dried foods, particularly cereals, was far lower than that in the package, FDA officials announced they would consider regulatory action.

The new proposals are expected to limit PCBs to five parts per million in any food packaging material, recycled or otherwise. Current regulations for reclaimed fibers and packaging materials don't allow any PCBs. But this standard was set before the problem was known and hasn't been enforced. FDA officials thus were faced with either enforcing the existing total ban or establishing a new limit.

The proposed limit can be met by more careful manufacturing control and by eliminating use of some contaminated paper for recycling, FDA experts insist. The packaging limit would keep possible contamination of contained foods to a fraction of a part per million, they say.

The agency is expected to also propose a limit of 0.1 part per million in infant food. "Infants take in more food per unit of weight and are also more sensitive," argues one official.

Tougher Poultry Ruling

An existing administrative restriction of five parts per million for poultry will be tightened to make it five parts per million in the fat rather than the whole bird. This change effectively would decrease the permitted levels as much as 10 times, agency experts explain. It would mean that when accidental contamination of turkeys and chickens occurs, usually through PCBs finding their way into feeds, many more birds would be seized and destroyed by federal officials.

Existing administrative restrictions of five parts per million in fish and 0.5 parts in eggs would be continued as formal regulations, while a limit of 0.2 parts per million in milk could be toughened.

These proposals still need final review by Charles Edwards, FDA Commissioner, but the agency's course appears clear. The proposed restrictions would be issued initially for a 60-day comment period and then would be republished, probably to take effect immediately.

When concern with PCB contamination mounted, Monsanto voluntarily restricted its use. The company no longer sells it for applications where it can escape into the environment. But the FDA insists Monsanto's PCB sales in the U.S. already have been reduced about as much as they will be.

The regulations primarily would affect makers and users of packaging materials. FDA officials argue the packaging industry can meet the five-part-per-million restriction with sufficient care, and it will provide adequate public protection. "When people are watching it (PCB contamination) it can be kept below five parts per million," argues one federal official. The agency insists that if the restriction were set below five parts per million the packaging companies couldn't meet it. Moreover, it's at that level that the problem of transfer to foods first becomes apparent.

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