THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, JULY 30, 1971

Poultry Found Safe for Eating Despite Contamination of Feed

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 29 — The Department of Agriculture announced today that tests had turned up no evidence that chickens given a feed contaminated with an industrial chemical were unsafe to eat.

Laboratory analysis of 124 sample chickens and 13 hogs collected since last Friday showed that the levels of the chemical, polychlorinated biphenyl, were "within acceptable" limits, the department said.

Soon after the first chicken tests were disclosed, the department announced that George A. Hormel and Company, Austin, Minn., meatpacker, was recalling all of its vacuum-packed Genoa salami after 11 persons had become ill. Armour & Company recalled its Genoa salami last week after nine persons had become ill.

The department attributed the toxin to a staphylococcus bacterium that causes nausea, vomiting and other digestive upsets.

Guideline Is Set

The Food and Drug Administration has set a preliminary guideline of 5 parts a million for the chemical found in chickens. The chemical is similar to DDT and does not break down easily in nature. An agriculture spokesman said that some of the samples reported today were free of the residue, most were below one part a million and a few were at a level of 1.4 parts a million.

The chemical, known as PCB, leaked from machinery into fish meal being processed by the East Coast Terminal, Inc., of Wilmington, N. C. The fish meal is an ingredient of mixed feed for poultry and livestock. The toxic chemical causes digestive distress in humans and has been shown to cause birth defects and liver damage in laboratory animals.

Tests Are Continuing

Officials of the Agriculture Department's Consumer and Marketing Service said that additional tests were under way on more samples from the 170 Federally inspected poultry slaughter plants in the 10 Southeastern states.

They said that 64 poultry plants had purchased the suspected fish meal between April 30 and July 16, when the plant closed. Millions of chickens ate the fish meal in mixed feed and were sold to consumer markets, they said.

Clarence Yeutter, administrator of the Consumer and Marketing Service, said, however, that "all of the evidence indicates that consumers have been buying a wholesome product and can continue to buy and enjoy chickens with confidence."

A spokesman for the Food and Drug Administration said that about 1,000 tons of the 16,000 tons of fish meal contaminated by the PCB had been returned to the Wilmington plant, and that he expected another 1,000 tons to be returned. Some 3,000 tons were held at the plant, leaving a balance of about 10,500 tons that has probably been fed to chickens, he said.

Holly Farms of Wilkesboro, N. C., believed to be the world's largest broiler producer, discovered the tainted fish meal. Dr. Kenneth May, director of research and quality assurance for Holly Farms, ran independent tests after finding chickens with a low rate of hatching.

Holly Farms traced the meal to the Wilmington fish meal plant and consulted with Monsanto Corporation, the country's sole producer of PCB, which has a wide variety of industrial uses. Holly Farms and Monsanto also notified the F.D.A. and the Department of Agriculture on July 16. Last Tuesday, the department announced that it was beginning a crash search for the meal.

Holly Farms, meanwhile, destroyed 77,000 chickens after, Dr. May said, he found PCB contamination in random samples.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL,
Friday, July 30, 1971

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It's safe to eat chickens that were given feed contaminated by the potent industrial chemical PCB, government officials said. The Food and Drug Administration said millions of fowl may have eaten the feed since a processing plant let PCB, which is similar to DDT, leak into it. But none of the chickens examined have contained PCB residues over tolerance levels deemed safe by the FDA.

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