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Company acts to curb DDT relative

Monsanto versus the polluted chickens

by Ed Edelson

WASHINGTON (USN) – At first glance, the family of chemicals called polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) would seem to interest only industrial chemists, but the obscure PCBs have become the center of an ecological story with some surprising twists to it.

PCBs are a close chemical relative of DDT. While not as toxic as DDT, they have been linked to birth defects and liver damage in animals. They have the disturbing habit of turning up in unexpected places such as in birds and fishes from England to San Francisco and in fish meal fed to chickens, turkeys and hogs used for human food.

Last year and again this July, PCB contamination forced the destruction of more than 100,000 broiler chickens. Last month the Department of Agriculture reported that a "significant proportion" of the chickens raised in 12 southern states became contaminated with PCB by eating tainted fish meal feed. This week alone the Food and Drug Administration confiscated thousands of eggs laid by chickens that ate contaminated feed.

The twist to the story is this: the Monsanto Company, only American producer of PCBs, is not waging the same stubborn fight against controls that most pesticide manufacturers have mounted. Instead, the company has voluntarily started to limit PCB sales to nonpolluting uses. At a cost of about $2 million, it has started an education and safety program aimed at company employees and customers. Not everyone is satisfied that it is going far enough, but the program is unusual enough to have drawn praise from many ecologists.

The PCB story started in the 1930s, when discovered new uses for PCBs – in sealants, inks, paints and pesticides, among other things. While PCB is an insulating material remained in closed systems, the new PCB uses spread the chemical out into the environment. Monsanto's plan is to eliminate all uses of PCBs except in closed systems.

The company bought back some 200,000 pounds of PCBs intended for such products as adhesives and coatings. Monsanto representatives are visiting customers to set up safety programs designed to avoid leakage of PCBs. A tight control program has been started in PCB plants, to the extent that the cleaning fluid used on employee's clothing is carefully collected and destroyed.

All these actions have not stilled critics of PCBs and Monsanto. Representative William F. Ryan (D-N.Y.) is pressing for a full ban. Representative Ryan believes that a total ban is the only way to eliminate PCB pollution.

The most recent chicken contamination incident lends support to that view. The PCB which caused the trouble came from a closed system – a leaking pipe in a heating system at a fish meal plant in Wilmington, North Carolina. For nearly three months, PCB dripped from the pipe into the fish meal, which was fed to catfish and to chickens on farms in Virginia, Delaware, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Indiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Mississippi. The FDA ordered the chickens destroyed and seized 45,600 pounds of catfish food.

Federal officials insist no contaminated chickens reached consumers, but admit they have no way of knowing if contaminated wide margin of safety. However, levels above these limits have been found in both chickens and eggs.

There is still no danger to poultry eaters, says Deputy Commissioner of the FDA James D. Grant. "...Any possible health hazard would come from continued consumption over a long period," he points out.

Ralph Nader wrote the FDA and Department of Agriculture insisting that emergency sampling programs for PCB in chickens, turkeys, hogs and fish were not adequate enough to protect consumers. Nadar argues that egg sampling tests only a tiny fraction of one per cent of the 70 billion eggs produced annually.

Monsanto believes the outbreak of PCB incidents can be curbed with proper safeguards, and that a total ban on PCBs is unnecessary. The company is working to produce a new family of PCBs that would break down into harmless compounds in a brief time after release into the environment. This could eliminate the pollution problem completely, another argument against a complete ban.

The problem is that the U.S. does not have a world-wide monopoly on PCB production. Several companies in Europe and Japan make the chemical, and these companies have not adopted the same expensive antipollution programs as Monsanto.

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