9/25/79 FYI: R. Isham
J. Ortiz
F. Provorny
J. Weber
D. Wood

PCB Idaho

FROM: Shara Taylor

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PCB Contamination in Eggs Traced to Chicken Feed Plant

PCB's, the controversial chemical compound banned in 1976, began showing up in eggs sold in six Western states in early July, sending Federal and state agencies on a two-month chase aimed at finding the source of the contamination. Last week, as Food & Drug Administration personnel traced the PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) contamination to a chicken feed plant in Billings, Mont., three supermarket chains took all eggs produced in Montana off the shelves at sixty-six stores and chicken owners in the region slaughtered thousands of chickens found to be contaminated by the chemical.

All this began in June with a leak at an unused transformer in the Pierce Packing Company's feed in Billings. PCB, used as a coolant, found its way into chicken feed produced at the facility and shipped to chicken farmers in Montana, Idaho, Washington, North Dakota, Utah and Minnesota.

In early July, a poultry inspector from the Department of Agriculture making routine checks at an egg processor in Provo, Utah, found unusually high PCB levels in the eggs. He took samples, put them in a freezer, and waited for his superior to return from vacation the following week.

Having inspected the eggs, the regional leader sent the sample via US mail to San Francisco for further tests, a trip that took five days.

Further delayed by traditional policies of reviewing their initial analyses, the San Francisco scientist sent word of their findings - PCB levels five times higher than the government permits in eggs - to the USDA's regional office on August 2, nearly one month after PCB was found in the eggs in Provo.

FDA was finally notified of the problem in mid-August, at which time the agency began a trace of eggs to Ritewood Egg Company in Franklin, Idaho, which uses feed from the Pierce Packing Company plant.

FDA began an inspection of other companies using Pierce feed and found similar PCB contamination.

Ritewood, a major supplier to area supermarkets, last week destroyed more than 1 million eggs and thousands of chickens.

The part of the Pierce plant, where the contamination originated, is being dismantled by workmen from an Oregon-based contracting concern that specializes in decontamination cases. The remainder of the Pierce facility has been given a clean bill of health from federal and state officials and is continuing with its traditional slaughter of hog parts for animal feed.

Health officials, concerned that all of the contaminated eggs and chickens have not been tracked down, are stepping up their activities, including inspections of processing plants and chicken farms.

In addition, health officials are checking residents of Franklin, Idaho, where the Ritewood Egg facility is located, to determine if they show traces of the suspected carcinogen.