WASHINGTON CLOSE-UP

U.S. Ignores the Real PCB Danger

By ROBERT WALTERS

It's business as usual within the federal government.

Officials of two major agencies, the Food and Drug Administration and the Agriculture Department, have spent the past two months facing the growing problem of a potentially serious health hazard while continually minimizing the contamination danger in their announcements to the public.

The hazard is posed by a highly toxic, extremely persistent family of industrial chemicals known as polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs. In the United States, the sole producer of PCBs is the Monsanto Co. of St. Louis, which markets them under the Aroclor trade name.

The unusual durability of PCBs—the very characteristic which has made them so valuable for a wide variety of industrial uses during the past four decades—now apparently is the principal factor in turning them into an environmental menace. They are highly resistant to heat and fire, insoluble in water and easily transferred through the food chain.

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PCB is however, soluble in animal fat, and that is precisely where an increasing number of reputable researchers are finding that it concentrates—in the fatty tissues of birds, animals and human beings.

The principal danger which PCB poses to human health is best described by Dr. Robert Risebrough, a member of the faculty at the University of California at Berkeley and one of the country's leading experts on the subject:

"There is no evidence to indicate that PCBs in the environment are likely to reach levels which would cause severe injury or death from short-term exposure. The possible PCB hazard, like so many environmental hazards, is one of long-term, low-level exposure and perhaps of effects from its combination with other poisons."

When Risebrough, Rep. William F. Ryan, D-N.Y., and others began to warn the country in early 1970 about the potential hazards posed by PCB, Monsanto was indignant about the "political charges, scare tactics and sensational headlines" which the firm said "completely ignore voluntary actions the company has taken to restrict use of the material."

When Ryan wrote to Monsanto in mid-1970 to request copies of the firm's technical bulletins on PCB, annual production and sales figures for the chemical, a complete list of the company's suggested uses for Aroclor and similar data, he was denied all of that information.

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Instead, Ryan received an indignant letter from John Mason, Monsanto's assistant general manager, who said the congressman's concerns were based on "a complete lack of factual information." Then he added:

"Monsanto is taking an extremely responsible attitude to this problem and is doing everything within its power to assure a maximum degree of control to prevent the possibility of the (PCB) escaping into the environment."

Precisely one year after that statement was made, a coolant containing substantial amounts of PCB was dripping onto 16,000 tons of fish meal at East Coast Terminals Inc., in Wilmington, N.C. Among the results of that leak:

● The Food and Drug Administration seized 45,000 pounds of Ralston Purina Co. catfish feed in Louisiana, Georgia and Mississippi. Ralston Purina then issued a recall for another 1,000 tons of fish feed.

● National By-products Inc., of Mason City, Ill., was forced to recall 48 tons of rendered meat meal, because of high levels of PCB.

● Holly Farms, a North Carolina firm which is the nation's largest poultry producer, voluntarily slaughtered 77,000 chickens after discovering high concentrations of PCB in the fowl.

● The Agriculture Department has ordered the slaughtering of 250,000 pounds of turkeys in Georgia. Last week, George R. Grange, deputy administrator of the department's consumer and marketing service, warned of another possible "spill" of PCB at an unnamed Minnesota plant.

● FDA officials seized 75,000 fresh eggs in Norfolk, Va., but allowed another 60,000 eggs with virtually identical concentrations of PCB to go on sale in the Washington, D.C., area because of inadequate testing and warning procedures, then refused even to discuss the Washington incident until pressured by Ryan and Ralph Nader.

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● In an equally bizarre action, the Agriculture Department ordered off the market more than 100,000 pounds of processed frozen eggs because laboratory tests had shown high levels of PCB, then partially reversed itself and released 36,000 pounds of the product.

Each time an official action has been taken, the federal officials have emphasized the lack of danger in short-term, low-level consumption — but their announcements have completely ignored the serious, long-term problem of residues in human tissue.

If that performance has failed to inspire citizen confidence in either Monsanto or the two federal agencies involved, the government now has turned to its time-honored solution for serious problems: A six-agency "interdepartmental task force" will coordinate a "government-wide investigation."