# Chemical in Cardboard Boxes Triggers FDA Investigation

By ROBERT WALTERS
Star Staff Writer

The Food and Drug Administration has discovered a new source of potentially serious food contamination from the industrial chemical compound known as polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs — the cardboard used in packaging 15 popular grocery products.

The items include crackers, bread crumbs and related products; macaroni and noodle products; pretzels, chips and specialty items; ready-to-eat breakfast cereals; prepared mixes, including cakes, pancakes and biscuits; and dried milk and dried milk products.

### Held Up Action

Others are dried desserts and pudding mixes, including unflavored gelatin; infant cereals; cookies; refrigerated unbaked specialties; rice, oatmeal and farina; chocolate and cocoa products; grated cheese and cheese products; dried fruits; and frozen fruit juices.

The FDA has known for more than three weeks that preliminary tests showed trace amounts of PCBs existed in the packaging materials and in some of the food items, but no notification of the problem has been provided to the public.

Instead, FDA officials convened a secret meeting on Sept. 14, where they discussed their growing concern about the situation with representatives of the food and packaging industries.

In addition, FDA officials here have instructed personnel in their 17 field offices throughout the country to conduct a high-priority survey of the packages and foods in the 15 different categories to determine the scope of the problem.

PCBs are a highly toxic, extremely persistent chemical compound manufactured exclusively by the Monsanto Co. of St. Louis for a wide variety of industrial uses. There is little available scientific data on their effect on humans, but they have caused serious liver damage and birth defects in laboratory test animals.

Rep. William F. Ryan, D-N.Y., who has pressed for a ban on future use of PCBs, said the current case was "typical of the FDA's failure to notify consumers of potentially serious health hazards."

Ryan added: "Unfortunately, the FDA seems to be more concerned about the image of American industry than the level of public knowledge of the integrity of its food supply.

Despite the lack of public notice, the problem of PCBs in packaging materials known within the industry as "gray-board" and "combination board" is reliably reported to be a matter of high concern among both government and Monsanto officials.

### Many Products Affected

During the past year, PCB spills have led to the seizure or hasty withdrawal from the market of wholesale lots of chickens, turkeys, eggs, fish, animal feed, meat by-products and a number of other items.

In most of those cases, federal officials have been able to isolate the contaminated products by identifying the source of the PCB leak and then locating the specific items which came into contact, directly or indirectly, with the chemical compound.

The packaging problem is potentially a far more pervasive and complex one. It also involves an area in which the government's scientific knowledge

See PCB, Page A-6

## PCB

Continued From Page A-1

and experience both are extremely limited.

For example, although the level of PCBs found thus far in food packages is considerably below the 5 parts per million tolerance level established by the FDA for edible tissue in meat, fish and poultry, the FDA has never established any "action level" for PCBs in food packages.

Similarly, although PCBs are generally inert, the FDA is known to be concerned about the possibility that the chemical compound can migrate or transfer to the food itself. The FDA already is reported to have found PCBs in some noodles and shredded wheat.

Ironically, the problem apparently is the product of a growing practice related directly to efforts to clean up the environment—the recycling of waste paper for use in packaging materials.

Some government officials believe that the PCBs were contained in printing inks used in the original paper, a use for which Monsanto has long promoted the compound.

Another suspected source is the so-called "no-carbon" carbon paper, whose principal manufacturer relied heavily on PCBs until last June. Tests on that paper have shown that it contains PCB levels as high as 30,000 parts per million.

The FDA first disclosed its data on PCBs in food packages to other government agencies at a Sept. 1 meeting. It was at that session that the decision was made to establish an interdepartmental task force, coordinated by the White House Office of Science and Technology, to conduct a governmentwide investigation into PCB contamination.

### Company Experts Attended

Among the representatives of the food and packaging industries summoned to the Sept. 14 meeting were officials of the Grocery Manufacturers of America, who coordinated the effort within the food industry, and the American Paper Institute, which is conducting technical studies in cooperation with the FDA.

MONS 032551