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Suspect chemical is found in state's fish, turkeys

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A chemical substance used extensively for decades and now under scrutiny by federal health officials has been detected in fish and turkeys in Minnesota.

The substance is polychlorinated biphenyl, PCB for short. The properties which make PCB desirable in industry may render it a potential hazard in the environment. Comparatively little is known of the PCBs, chemically similar to the pesticide DDT. But laboratory tests have linked them with skin disease, liver damage and birth defects.

PCB compounds are extremely stable and inert: that is, not easily broken down. They resist oxidation and are highly insoluble.

PCB is used by the plastics industry to make plastic pliable. Without the PCB additive, the plastic would be too brittle for household use.

It is also used by many companies to regulate the temperatures of chemical baths that must be kept at constant temperatures.

"PCBs are almost totally indigestable by nature's cleanup organisms, bacteria and such," said Russell Frazier, chief of analytical services for the State Health Department.

PCB thus accumulates in aquatic life such as fish as well as on river and lake bottoms, Frazier said.

The health department recently found that 25 percent of some fish samples taken from the Mississippi River in the Red Wing and Lake Pepin areas contained traces of PCB.

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Amounts ranged from one-half part per billion to 45 parts per billion, a department source said.

The fish were caught in 1969 and frozen until the department's laboratory acquired the capability to test for PCB. Tests on fish now in the river are expected soon.

Research on PCB has been sparse and officials of the health department and of the Pollution Control Agency (PCA) are hesitant to say whether the substance is detrimental to the fish or to persons who eat them.

However, Frazier said he thought that the levels of PCB found were so low "it probably doesn't mean a darn thing for the fish."

The Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing Co. (3M) Chemolite plant, one of several industrial facilities on the Mississippi upstream from Red Wing, has discharged PCB into the river.

One sample of plant effluent taken last June 4 contained nine parts of PCB per billion, the health department reported. Again, no one is sure what harm there might be in such a quantity.

"Although no standards have yet been formally established, 3M became aware of the PCB problem more than a year ago and has been phasing out the use of PCB at the Chemolite plant," a company spokesman said. "The company has not purchased PCB since August 1970. Steps have been and are being taken to further reduce, if not eliminate, any discharge into the Chemolite waste water effluent during the phaseout period," he said. 3M used PCBs in making resins.

The health department said there was no way of knowing how much PCB had been dumped into the Mississippi from the Chemolite facility.

As yet the PCA has not set a limit on the amount of PCB which can be discharged into Minnesota waters, because so little is known about the substance. Scientists do know that PCB is prevalent in a multitude of products, however, including plastic and waxed bread wrappers.

The turkey growing industry in Minnesota also is worried about PCB. Last week the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) impounded about 50,000 turkeys for suspected PCB contamination. The birds had been raised on a farm near Wedena, Minn.

The farm's operator, Peter Burdick Co., refused to comment on the case but Dr. L. H. Burkert, regional director of meat and poultry inspection for the USDA, said the source of the PCB was not known.

Why the contaminated turkeys were confined to one farm in Minnesota also is a mystery, Burkert said.

"We're testing every flock before it goes to market," he said. Up to 1 million turkeys may be in quarantine around the state pending testing. Fifty persons have been running the tests for two weeks already, Burkert said.

Minnesota, the largest turkey-producing state in the country, last year slaughtered 17.7 million turkeys worth $60 million in sales.

The USDA has set an interim limit of five parts of PCB per million as acceptable in turkeys and other poultry marketed for human consumption. The amounts of PCB found in the impounded turkeys has not been released.

With the holiday season and peak turkey sales approaching, growers obviously are concerned with the USDA's action. They are worried about a possible scare not unlike that which ruined cranberry sales in 1959 when the government warned that some bogs had been sprayed with a chemical that produced cancer in rats.

The government began inspecting turkeys across the nation after some fowl in North Carolina were found to contain inordinate amounts of PCB. That contamination was traced to fish meal which had been exposed to PCB before it was converted into feed.

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