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FDA Rejects Ban on PCB

By JOAN KRAMER

WASHINGTON (FNS) — Food & Drug Commissioner Charles Edwards last week rejected an outright ban on the industrial chemical PCB. He said "positive steps," not "scare headlines," are the way to deal with its potential danger to public health.

"Public confusion has created public alarm and a feeling of still another crisis in the food supply," he told a news conference. "I know the confusion is unnecessary and I believe the alarm is greater than the facts will justify."

Rep. William F. Ryan (D., N.Y.), who introduced the bill to ban distribution of PCB in interstate commerce, promptly replied: "I agree that scare headlines are not the answer — what is needed is preventive action and full disclosure of any food contamination" by the FDA.

Ryan referred to an FDA finding last June that PCB in recycled-cardboard food containers had been migrating in unacceptably high levels to some foods. FDA alerted the Grocery Manufacturers of America and the American Paper Institute to this problem Sept. 14, but did not make the facts public until last Monday.

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FDA Head, Bars PCB Ban, Asks 'Positive Steps'

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Said Ryan: "FDA seems more concerned about the image of American industry than the level of public knowledge of the wholesomeness of its food."

Based on the June finding, one of the "positive steps" FDA is taking is a high-priority survey of 15 food categories packaged in recycled cardboard containing PCB. Food packaging is a major use of recycled paper, which the Government has encouraged to reduce waste.

FDA acknowledged last week that the PCB discovery could spark a conflict between environmental and public health goals, like the recent policy reversal over phosphate detergents.

The food-additive order for pulp from reclaimed fiber prohibits the salvage of used paper and paperboard which bears or contains any poisonous or deleterious substance for food packaging material.

Depending on the extent of food contamination in its survey launched Sept. 8, FDA may restrict the use of recycled paper containing PCB for food packaging or set PCB guidelines for paperboard and food products.

In the area of "positive steps" so far, FDA said Monsanto Chemical Co., the nation's only producer of PCB, has promised to stop selling it to food and feed processing plants. In addition, National Cash Register discontinued its use in "carbonless" carbon paper, the primary PCB source in recycled paper, last june.

However, FDA revealed a further complicaton: "We know that these chemicals have important flame-resistant properties and, properly used, directly assist Government and industry in protecting the consumer against fire," declared Edwards.

In testing made public last week, FDA said it had found low-level PCB residues in 479 of 15,000 raw agricultural commodities samples over the last 22 months. Most of these were fish. A further market-basket survey turned up PCB levels ranging from a trace to 0.36 part per million in 22 of 720 samples. Seventeen were meat, fish and poultry.

The agency has set "action levels" for PCB at 5 PPM in fish and poultry, 0.5 PPM for eggs and 0.2 PPM for milk.

In the June survey, FDA found 0.4 PPM of PCB in cereal products. When the individual components of the survey were tested, FDA traced the residues to shredded wheat biscuits (up to 24 PPM) and subsequently to shredded wheat packaging.

It was later learned that the packaging firm used about 95 per cent recycled paper to manufacture paperboard containers. The firm's paperboard showed PCB levels ranging from 1.7 to 433 PPM.

Analysis of 28 packaged-food samples using the firm' paperboard uncovered PCB in nine samples. Corn mea spaghetti dinner, grits, mixed baby cereal, noodle dinne and pancake mix contained 0.1 to 3 PPM.

"We are not aware of any foods contaminated a significatn levels on a regular and consistent basis. If suc a food were identified, a much lower action level would b taken to prevent unwarranted long term exposures." S said Dr. Albert Kolbye, Jr., deputy director, FDA burea of foods.

Food categories being checked include crackers, brea crumbs and related products; macaroni and noodl products; pretzels, chips and specialty items; ready-t eat breakfast cereals; prepared mixes including cake pancakes and biscuits; dried milk, and dried mil products.

Also: Dried desserts and pudding mixes, includin unflavored gelatin; infant cereals; cookies; refrigerate unbaked specialties; rice, oatmeal and farina; chocolat and cocoa products; grated cheese and cheese product dried fruits and frozen fruit juices.

Dr. Edwards concluded: "We still have as man questions as answers. We know that PCB is a potential bu not an immediate health hazard. But we do not know ho long-term exposure to PCB might affect human healt and we cannot explain its inconsistent presence in th environment."

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