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LONG ISLAND PRESS
October 31, 1971

And Then There's Dieldrin, Killer Insecticide

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Special to The Press

From the Washington Post

WASHINGTON—Last spring a female bald eagle found tangled in a barbed wire fence was taken to the nearby home of conservationist Kenneth D. Otis at Accokeek, Md. The eagle refused to eat and died that night.

Otis delivered the carcass to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland where an autopsy report released last week showed that the eagle died from ingesting dieldrin, a highly toxic chemical that enters the food chain.

Dr. Lucille Stickel, a pesticide coordinator at Patuxent, said that the lethal residue could have come from high exposure over a short period of time or low exposure over a long period. Bald eagles eat fish and other birds.

The brain of the eagle contained 11 parts per million (ppm) of dieldrin. Experimental studies show that residues of four ppm in the brain can be fatal.

THE CARCASS contained 18 ppm of the insecticide, and there were traces in the brain and body of other environmental contaminants including DDE, DDD, heptachlor epoxide and PCB. None were judged to be at a level to cause the eagle's death.

Dieldrin is not a similar chemical, aldrin, which breaks down its chemical composition into dieldrin when applied, are used for termite control. Aldrin also is used in the soil to kill corn root insects. Both formerly were used on citrus and grains.

Because they are persistent chemicals—ones that stay around a long time and work their way up the food chain—the Environmental Protection Agency recently initiated proceedings that would cancel all uses. Manufacturers have appealed and the National Academy of Sciences has appointed a panel of scientists to advise the EPA.

DR. STICKEL said it would be impossible to determine where the eagle was poisoned, since the birds range over such a wide area.

There is a lot of dieldrin around and it is found in varying quantities in most of the birds on which autopsies are performed at the center, but it is not always the cause of death, she said.

In a 1969 study of 69 bald eagle carcasses sent to the center, 11 were judged to have died of environmental poisons and eight of these were from dieldrin. One each died of DDT, lead and mercury.

Earlier this year the Patuxent center performed autopsies on 22 bald and golden eagle carcasses found in Wyoming. The center said those eagles were poisoned with thallium sulphate used for predator control.

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