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Editorials

Favor FDA overhaul

For many months recycling of used glass, metal and paper has been hallowed as a near-perfect answer to some of the nation's pollution problems. But new evidence has come to light that food can be contaminated by packaging made from recycled cardboard. It seems nothing is sacred.

To be sure, officials say the recycled cardboard must contain a toxic industrial compound for any food contamination to occur. Monsanto Chemical Corp., the only maker of the compound, has stopped selling it where it might get into cardboard.

Yet the recycle scare points out a new frontier of research for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), primary government watchdog in these matters. To date the FDA has done little to study the possible dangers of continued use of recycled products.

It knows little about the possible multiplying effect of recycling a contaminated product again and again. Toxic levels could increase with recycling.

Also, the FDA began only this week to survey the extent, if any, of contaminated food packaging in Oregon.

Congress is aware of the new challenges facing the FDA in the nation's recent wave of consumerism. There is some doubt the FDA as currently organized is adequate for the job.

Oregon Sen. Mark Hatfield has introduced a bill that would give the FDA's power to approve new drugs to a new independent board appointed by the President. Washington's Sen. Warren G. Magnuson has teamed with Sen. Frank E. Moss of Utah to introduce a bill also relieving the FDA of some responsibilities.

Their bill would limit the FDA to only food and drug matters. Other FDA activities would go to a Consumer Product Safety Commission.

President Nixon would like to see a major overhaul of the FDA into a super-agency for consumer protection.

All of these proposals merit consideration. The FDA clearly needs help. Postcards or letters to Oregon's congressional delegation likely would help speed reform along.

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Editorials

Our Opinions

Public Welfare Must Come First

THE TANDEM team of DDT and PCB could constitute as much a hazard to human health as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, if the sudden scientific accumulation of information about their combined effects is accurate.

DDT is the abbreviation for dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, a colorless, contact insecticide. PCB stands for polychlorinated biphenyls, an industrial chemical that closely resembles DDT. PCB is used mainly in heat exchange systems, non carbon copying papers, paints and pesticides.

PCB resists decomposition, can withstand temperatures up to 1,000 degrees Farenheit, is insoluble in water but soluble in animal fat and, therefore, easily transferable through the human food chain.

All the effects of PCB are unknown, including the critical level at which it becomes a human health hazard. However, there is evidence that a combination of DDT and PCB is causing environmental contamination. PCB alone has been known to cause human death, liver and skin disease and is suspected of causing birth defects.

In recent months as many as 88,000 chickens, 50,000 turkeys, tens of thousands of eggs and tons of fish meal have been destroyed because of PCB contamination.

The only American manufacturer of PCB, Monsanto Co. of St. Louis, resists any ill effects from the chemical and refuses to divulge the amount of the chemical being made. It also has denied to congressmen information on PCB.

A six - agency interdepartmental task force has been formed to coordinate a government - wide investigation.

It appears the government will follow the same policy regarding PCB as it has with DDT: that no "imminent hazard to the public" exists.

We can respect the government, and the federal Environmental Protection Agency, (EPA), for not rushing to ban every product someone thinks is harmful to the environment or humans.

However, we believe a ban on both DDT and PCB is now justifiable. In fact, a federal court has ordered the EPA for a second time within a year to put a ban on DDT into effect because of mounting scientific evidence that it poses an immediate hazard.

Given the recent evidence linking PCB to DDT this court order should be expanded to include PCB.

Granted, a ban would work a hardship on farmers who will have to find a safer substitute pesticide if they also by haven't and the Monsanto Co., which may have to limit some of its products or change their composition.

However, this inconvenience has to be balanced against the public welfare. Until the government wait until people are becoming ill or dying before it eliminates the offending chemicals or shows it will take preventive steps when it has a reasonable basis of scientific and legal fact supporting this might happen? We think the latter course of action is the obligation of government.

Finally, the federal EPA should conduct comprehensive studies of other industrial chemicals to determine if they are entering the food chain and their possible effects. PCB was no sound for 40 years before anyone thought to take a second look at it.

Also, as scientific studies reveal unwanted side effects of industrial chemicals, the government's environmental protection agencies must guard against replacements that may be worse than the original offenders.

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PCB and the FDA

Last June, the Food and Drug Administration found potentially dangerous concentrations of the industrial chemical polychlorinated dithenyl in a variety of dried food products, including some baby cereals. No public announcement of the discovery was made until this month, when it was revealed by Representative William F. Ryan.

Ryan coupled his revelation with a castigation of the FDA for showing "more concern about the image of American industry, rather than the public." The Congressman has a point.

In defense of the FDA, it should be noted that the problem was not simply overlooked. The probable source is identified as the printing ink used in recycled paper in which the foods were packaged; since June, PCB has been removed from printing ink. The FDA then had solved the problem for the future, so why risk a public slap and the possibility of lasting damage to consumer confidence in the suspect food stuffs?

So there was some logic in the FDA's silence, but not enough to justify it. The FDA did find PCB in amounts that it has labeled unacceptable in other foods. PCB, a chemical cousin of DDT, has been implicated in human death and disability. The only valid action under the circumstances was a full public disclosure of the facts in its possession without consideration for the reputation or the financial health of the packagers.

The FDA is mistaken in its evident belief that the public is prepared to panic at the mention of tainted food. And the public should be able to expect the unadulterated truth from agencies established for public protection.