

Launches Investigation by FDA

By ROBERT WALTORS

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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 carcinogenic material in packaging in popular grocery products.

The items include crackers, bread crumbs and instant noodle mixes; processed and noodle products; proteins, oils and specialty flours; ready-to-eat breakfast cereals; prepared mixes; including soups, puddings and biscuits; and dried milk and dried milk products.

Others are dried cereals and pudding mixes, including milk-based puddings; infant cereals; cookies; refrigerated imbedded cereals; rice, oatmeal and flours; chocolate and cocoa products; ground cheese and cheese products; dried fruits and frozen fruit juice.

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 indication 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 12 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 in-

dustrial 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 "the first of the FDA's future in-house consumers of potentially serious health hazards."

Ryan said, "Unfortunately, the FDA seems to be more concerned about the image of American industry than the level of PCBs."

See PCB, Page A-5

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Continued From Page A-1
of public knowledge of the danger of its food supply."

Despite the lack of public notice, the problem of PCBs in packaging materials — known within the industry as "leakage" and "leak-in" — is in "a bad way," he reliably reported to be a matter of high concern among both government and industry officials.

During the past year, PCB leaks have led to the seizure of nearly 100,000 pounds of milk, cheese, eggs, fish, animal feed, food ingredients and a number of other items.

In most of these cases, federal officials have been able to identify 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 particularly more pervasive and complex now. It also impresses an area in which the government's scientific knowledge 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 tissues 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.

Recycling a Factor

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

made to establish an independent test force, operated by the White House Office of Science and Technology, conduct a governmentwide investigation into PCB contamination.

Company Experts Attended
Among the representatives of the food and packaging industries contacted for the meeting were officials of a Grocery Manufacturers Association, who coordinated a effort within the food industry and the American Paper Institute, which is conducting technical studies in cooperation with the FDA.

In addition, technical experts from a number of individual companies were present. One company publicist said the meeting "was being held in secrecy," but an FDA official objected to that description, pointing out that it was simply "closed" sessions which were announced to the public.

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In addition, technical experts from a number of industry companies were present. One industry publication said the meeting "was being held in utmost secrecy," but an FDA spokesman objected to that description, explaining that it was always "closed" sessions which were announced to the public.

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