Feedstuffs
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PCBs Judged 'No Imminent Hazard'

Feedstuffs Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — PCBs are not an imminent human health hazard, and the government with full cooperation from the private sector is taking steps to eliminate any potential hazard, the Food & Drug Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency stated at a joint press briefing this week.

Dr. Charles C. Edwards, FDA commissioner, stressed three points:

1. FDA is taking specific, adequate and positive steps to deal with whatever problem or potential problem that PCBs are likely to pose to human health.

2. The government rejects the need and in fact the feasibility as some have proposed for an outright ban on the substances. Although the use of PCBs requires strict control, an outright ban is not feasible and would not be in the best interest of the consumer.

3. FDA also rejects the idea that crisis headlines and demands for national health alerts are justified or needed to meet the situation as it is known today.

Edwards said FDA knows that the background of PCB in the environment is not high "but we do not know how long term exposure to PCB might effect human health and we cannot yet explain the inconsistent presence of the chemicals in certain areas of the environment. We do know there are certain strong reasons for continued use of these chemicals. For example, they have important flame-resistant properties and properly used, directly assist government and industry in protecting the consumer against fire. We do not know if a requirement for substitute chemicals in some cases might not prove more of a health threat than PCBs."

Dr. Clayton Yeutter, administrator of USDA's Consumer & Marketing Service, said his agency did not know the source of PCBs which were discovered in turkeys at Detroit Lakes, Minn., in August. Reo F. Duggan, FDA deputy associate commissioner for compliance, said his agency had gone to Minnesota, visited the feed mill which provided rations for all the turkeys, and the rendering plant which provided fat to the feed plant, and found no source of the PCB. Yeutter referred to the Minnesota case as an "isolated" incident which is still mystifying government officials. He said the processor involved, Swift Dairy & Poultry Co., is still holding the turkeys under detainment orders.

Recent Cases

Feed and livestock and poultry have been implicated in several of the recent PCB cases. In January, 1970, FDA established an "action level") of 5 ppm. PCB in poultry edible tissue after the chemical turned up in fowl which had been fed ground bread cartons and wrappers which are suspected of containing PCB. On July 16 this year, leakage of PCB from a heat exchange unit at east coast terminals, Wilmington, N.C., caused contamination of pasteurized fishmeal at that plant which was subsequently fed as a ration to chickens and catfish. In August this year, FDA set an action level of 0.5 ppm. for PCB in eggs and 5 ppm. was reaffirmed for poultry. Later in August, 75,000 eggs were recommended for seizure at Norfolk, Va., because of PCB in layer rations. Also in August, FDA investigated several cases of PCB contamination of domestic and imported fish meal, and a recall was made of meat scrap meal from National By-Products, Mason City, because of suspected PCB residues.

Yeutter said that based on results of intensified testing in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota following the turkey incident, USDA determined it was an isolated occurrence and is now reducing its PCB testing in those three states. All of the 50,000 turkeys involved in Minnesota were produced under grower contracts by a single company and consumed feed produced under grower contracts by a single company and consumed feed produced by the company's mill at Wadena, Minn. The mill's output of feed is used only for the one company's turkeys. C&MS officials said results of tests by a private laboratory and confirmed by C&MS laboratories on live turkeys at eight farms that contract with the company show that no birds exceed the FDA administrative guideline of 5 ppm. Samples from turkeys produced by other growers in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota also were within acceptable levels.

Egg Testings

C&MS has tested egg products from 19 plants in the three-state area and also including northwest Iowa and northeast Nebraska to determine whether these products were contaminated. All 38 samples were below FDA's maximum acceptable level for egg products of 0.5 ppm. C&MS is continuing its testing program of poultry and eggs in the southeast because of wide-spread distribution of the PCB-contaminated fishmeal from the Wilmington plant.

Since USDA began the three-phase testing in the Southeast in late July, 1,076 tests have been run on chickens, 331 on turkeys and 218 on hogs. As a result of farm pre-testing, about 165,000 hens and broilers were destroyed before leaving farms. Also found in violation were one turkey sample, representing 250,000 lb., one hog and three chicken samples, representing 75,000 lb. USDA has made 654 tests of egg products in the Southeast, retaining 11 lots (133,200 lb.) that showed PCB levels in excess of an FDA maximum acceptable level of 0.5 ppm.

Deputy FDA Commissioner James D. Grant told the briefing that, except for isolated incidents involving fish, almost all of the high levels of PCBs found have been associated with accidents, which FDA is now working to prevent. The Monsanto Co., the primary domestic supplier of PCBs, is only selling the compounds now for transformer, capacitor and non-food heat exchange uses. PCBs, Grant said, are not now being used in the National Cash Register Co.'s "no-carbon carbon paper", but there are large quantities in office files throughut the U.S. The NCR paper was apparently a prime source of PCB in recycled paper which later went into cardboard containers used by the food industry, Grant said.

FDA Analyses

As of Aug. 30, FDA analyzed 166 samples of eggs for PCBs as a follow up on the East Coast terminal fish meal accident. Fifty-five of these contained residues over the action level of 0.5 ppm. Seizures aggregating about 75,000 eggs have been made. FDA also seized one shipment of fish meal and five shipments of a catfish and trout feed manufactured from the contaminated meal. It was then agreed the responsible firms would recall the fish meal and fish feed.

Dr. Albert C. Kolbye, deputy director of FDA's Bureau of Foods, said 200 milligrams total PCB dosage can probably be tolerated over a protracted period of time without significant adverse effect by humans. It would take 22 months of daily ingestion of 300 micrograms of PCB to arrive at a total ingestion of 200 milligrams. On a shorter term basis, the highest amount of PCBs temporarily permitted by FDA in any food under its jurisdiction is 5 ppm. This theoretically would permit an adult to eat about a half pound of food contaminated with PCB at 5 ppm. each and every day for six months, but human exposures to food contaminated to this extent are infrequent and sporadic, he said.