

Raleigh, N. C.

The News and Observer, Thursday

Harmful PCB In Many Foods

New York Times News Service

NEW YORK — Three years after the Food and Drug Administration's first findings that some foods were contaminated with a toxic industrial chemical known as PCB, quantities of the persistent substance are still being found in food on grocery shelves.

Of some 3,500 samples of fish, cheese, milk and eggs tested in the last 18 months, one out of five contained measurable levels of PCB, an FDA administrator reported during last week's annual meeting of the American Chemical Society here.

The report was one of 21 on various aspects of the PCB problem delivered during the week-long meeting. In general, the reports indicated that PCB was one of the most dangerous (hundreds of times more toxic than DDT, for example); and most widespread of synthetic chemicals.

One government researcher reported evidence suggesting that half the human population may already carry quantities of PCB in its flesh.

There also were reports that steps have been taken to reduce the risk of additional quantities of the chemical "escaping" from its industrial applications and entering the ecosystem where it could cause birth defects and liver damage.

Among the reports were these:

— Scientists from the Canadian Wildlife Service have found quantities of PCB in polar bears, seals and arctic fish. The researchers said the nearest site of industrial usage of PCB was thousands of miles south of where the animals live.

— Analysis of water and bottom sediments samples by the U. S. Geological survey has detected varying levels of PCB in the waters of New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Virginia, South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Texas, Arkansas and California. Tests in other states are expected in 1973.

— Michigan State University researchers found that the reason for an almost complete cessation of reproduction in mink ranches in the Great Lakes region was the presence of PCB in the Coho salmon fed to the mink. A level of 5 parts per million of PCB in the diet caused complete reproductive failure. The mink ranches have switched to other foods and Michigan officials have warned citizens not to eat more than one meal a week of Lake Michigan Coho.

PCB, which stands for polychlorinated biphenyl, is one of the most widely used industrial chemicals. Various types of PCB are used as plasticizers, adhesives, sealants and printing inks. They are also used in capacitors, in transformers such as the cylindrical type seen on utility poles, and as heat-exchange fluids in many industrial operations. The sole maker of PCB in the U. S. is Monsanto, which uses the trade name Aroclor.

It is generally believed that PCB finds its way into the environment as the result of burning discarded plastics and other materials in which they are used and through leakage from machinery in which liquid PCB is used.

Dr. Albert C. Klobbe Jr., deputy director of the F.D. A.'s bureau of foods, spoke at the chemical society meeting and said that despite the widespread presence of PCB in the environment, the chemical is not considered a threat of human health.

"I think the problem is under control," he said. "We have very large margin of safety for PCB as long as we avoid undue accidental exposures."

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MONS 069861