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WASHINGTON STAR, Sept. 19, 1971

PCB Danger Broader Than Expected

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Special to The Star

An unpublished report in the Department of Interior shows that the potential danger from polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) is far greater than was apparent only a few months ago.

The accidental nature of the summer scare, when PCB leaked into and contaminated fish meal fed to poultry in several southern states, tended to indicate that the presence of the poison is rare in food products.

But the Interior study shows that the presence of PCBs is no accident; the powerful poison is almost as pervasive as DDT. And many experts consider it more hazardous than DDT.

Tests on numerous varieties of fish in rivers around the country show as much as 12.5 parts per million (PPM) of this chemical. The Food and Drug Administration has tentatively set a limit of five ppm for fish and one-half ppm for eggs. The reason for the difference is not clear.

But the growth of this hazard is readily apparent from the Interior survey of fish samples. In only one year, the average level of PCB in fresh water fish has risen significantly.

PCB comes from industrial waste, especially in the manufacture of plastics, adhesives, printing inks, building materials and paper products. The only company that produces it is the Monsanto Chemical Co.

PCB finds its way into fish that live in streams carrying wastes from manufacturers of these products.

But PCB also finds its way into food products in tiny amounts when the chemical "migrates" from packaging container to the food itself.

Tests show that this "migration" takes place in cartons of hot roll mixes, macaroni, spaghetti, noodles, cookies, gelatin, shredded wheat, crackers, bread crumbs, and noodle dinners.

As a result of the tests and public concern over the chicken feed incident, the FDA has launched an extensive investigation. It has also set up an inter-departmental task force to determine how serious the problem is and what should be done further about it.

Among matters to be scrutinized by the task force is the use of bakery waste as feed for poultry. There are reports that PCB enters the system when cartons and wrappings are grounded up with bakery waste to become poultry feed.

In setting up the task force the FDA sought to reassure the public by saying that enforcement activities of FDA and USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) "are adequate to protect the public health from the occasional accident which can result in short term but controllable human exposure to PCBs in the food supply."

But it also ad[illegible] that the "size and [illegible] of long-term low [illegible] exposure" to [illegible] "[illegible] unknown."

Results of tests [illegible] vary greatly. One [illegible] environmental [illegible] showed that [illegible] population of [illegible] died from a con[illegible] of only one ppm of [illegible] to claims that [illegible] of 100 ppm had "no adverse effect" on rates. A level of 250 ppm has been found in humans according to EPA officials.

Until more definite figures are available, FDA should not allow even as much as 5 ppm, according to a [illegible] authority on the subject, [illegible] Risebrough, a research [illegible] at the University of California. He calls FDA's tolerance level "unfounded" and arbitrary.

There is general agreement on one thing: the toxicity of PCBs. Risebrough puts them among the most poisonous compounds known."

MONS 031764