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U.S. FEARS POISON IN SOME CHICKENS

Search On in 12 States After Feed Is Found Tainted

By WILLIAM M. BLAIR
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WASHINGTON, July 23 — The Department of Agriculture announced today a search in 12 states for broiler chickens and chicken feed that may be contaminated by an industrial chemical.

The toxic substance is of the chemical family of polychlorinated biphenyes. Spokesmen for the Agriculture Department and the Food and Drug Administration said that the PCB, as the chemical is known, had leaked from heating machinery used to pasteurize fish meal at the East Coast Terminal, Inc., Wilmington, N.C. The meal was sold for use as an ingredient in poultry feed and may have found its way into some hog feeds, officials said.

They said that the meal had been sold to at least 64 feed processing plants. These included plants that raise and process poultry for retail markets. The officials said that the Wilmington plant had recalled its fish meal shipped since April 30, the indicated date of the beginning of the problem. The plant closed voluntarily a week ago, they said.

The toxic substance causes digestive distress, nausea, fever and other upsets in humans, officials said. The Food and Drug Administration said it had a guideline of 5 parts per million for the PCB substance. Agriculture scientists said that 15 to 20 parts per million had been found in fish meal still at the North Carolina plant.

Alarm Over Egg-Hatching

The contamination was disclosed by an unnamed commercial poultry processor who became alarmed at the low rate of hatching of eggs in his broiler breeding chickens. Using private laboratory tests, he found up to 40 parts per million in the fat of some of his chickens, Agriculture officials said. He traced the meal to the Wilmington plant, they said.

The meal was sold to users in Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

The Agriculture Department said its agents would try to track down users of the feed and examine chickens—those still on the farms and those going to wholesale or retail markets—for signs of the chemical.

The F.D.A. set a guideline of five parts per million for the substance after it had been found in feed from an Agway, Inc., plant in Sullivan County, N. Y., early this year. Higher concentrations were found in chickens fed the feed and shipped to a processing plant in New Jersey.

Federal officials said that 146,000 chickens had been destroyed in Sullivan, Orange and Ulster Counties, N. Y., as a result of the finding.

16,000 Tons of Meal

An Agriculture Department spokesman said that about 16,000 tons of fish meal had been produced at the Wilmington plant between April 30 and July 16. Normally, fish meal makes up only a small portion of mixed poultry feeds.

A spokesman for Representative William F. Ryan, Democrat of Manhattan, said that Mr. Ryan had been trying for a year to get the shipment of PCB prohibited in interstate commerce. He introduced legislation to that effect but it has languished in the House Interstate Commerce Committee, the spokesman said.

He said Mr. Ryan had warned of "widespread" contamination of foodstuffs, particularly poultry, before the New York case. He had looked into the toxic effects of PCB after reading a study by California scientists on the chemical and finding that it was not soluable in water and could be taken into the human system by physical contact, the spokesman said.

PCB has a wide range of industrial use, including paints and resins and in the manufacture of plastics and other materials. In the North Carolina case, the substance was used in a heat exchanger to cool liquid. In the New York chicken case, the PCB was believed to have been in paint that flaked off a storage bin or to have been absorbed by the feed from the paint.

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