FDA Moves to Stem PCB Contamination In Foods, Packaging

Agency Proposes Tough Limits For Residues of the Chemical, Which Is Used in Equipment

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL *Staff Reporter*

WASHINGTON — The Food and Drug Administration proposed strict limits on the use of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, in an effort to prevent potential health hazards.

The FDA restrictions, as expected, seek to eliminate all sources of PCB contamination in plants that process or make food, feed or packaging materials. Companies wouldn't be allowed to use the chemical in equipment, machinery or on surfaces where it would cause contamination.

The FDA said some PCB residues unavoidably will remain in foods and food-packaging materials until the proposed restrictions have their full effect. As a result, the agency established "temporary tolerances" for PCB residues in various foods and packaging materials. These tolerances establish the PCB levels at which the products would be considered adulterated under food and drug law and subject to seizure.

Rules Called "Realistic"

"The regulations are realistic and will adequately protect the public health from the potential dangers of PCBs," Dr. Charles Edwards, FDA commissioner, explained.

PCBs are made in the U.S. only by Monsanto Co. and used widely in electrical equipment as heat-transfer agents. The chemical has high conductivity, low flammability and other favorable properties. However, experiments with test animals show that high ingested doses cause liver damage and other harm. The FDA said PCBs' wide use and chemical stability have resulted in their appearance in the food supply. But the agency said additional research is needed to determine the effects of long-term, low-level human exposure to the chemical.

A Monsanto spokesman said: "We would view the FDA regulations as a reinforcement to our voluntary program to restrict the uses of PCB. Monsanto has been in a phase-out program since 1970 when we announced no more sales to open systems."

Monsanto said it's phasing out its closed-systems heat transfer applications of PCB and is orienting its sales toward electrical uses only, which are also closed systems. Estimated production of PCB in 1971, Monsanto said, was about 20,000 tons, of which about 14,400 were used in closed systems.

Proposed Tolerances

The tolerances proposed by the FDA are: 5 parts per million in food packaging material; 0.1 ppm in infant and junior foods; 3 ppm in fish and the fat of poultry; 5 ppm in animal feed components; 0.6 ppm in finished animal feeds; 0.6 ppm in eggs, and 3.5 ppm in milk and dairy products on a fat basis.

The FDA already has established administrative guides to limit PCB contamination of some of these foods. But the proposal would cover more foods, including food-packaging materials, and provide for more formal regulation. The agency is concerned particularly with restricting PCB contamination of food packaging-material. The chemical has been detected in virgin and recycled paper pulp.

FDA officials said with careful quality control and elimination of PCB-containing waste paper from the recycling process, packaging concerns can meet the proposed limitation.

Interested parties were allowed 60 days for comment before the FDA reissues the PCB proposal in final form.