PCB Scare Exaggerated, FDA Chief Says

BY DAVID HESS
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WASHINGTON — Headline-seeking "alarmists" have exaggerated the danger of toxic PCB on human health, the head of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said Wednesday.

FDA chief Charles C. Edwards said public confusion over PCB, a chemical used in several manufacturing processes, stems largely from "a few alarmists . . who have been aided and abetted by unbalanced reporting."

At the same time, Edwards conceded that the confusion is due in part to "deficient knowledge" about PCB, and said his agency does not know how long-term exposure to PCB might affect human health.

STUDIES, he said, indicate there are certain safe levels of PCB in fish and eggs. But even those levels, he implied, are subject to change with advancing knowledge about the substance.

PCB is short for polychlorinated biphenyls, a family of industrial chemicals used in making plastics and adhesives, printing inks, electric and building materials, heat-exchange mechanisms and paper products.

Papers used to wrap certain processed foods, Edwards said, were found to have contained PCB and transferred traces of it to the food.

The highly toxic substance also is found in trace amounts in the natural environment, he said.

The only large-scale poisoning of humans occured in Japan in 1954, when a heat exchanger leaked PCB into rice oil later consumed by people. About 600 persons became ill and a few died. Some babies later were born with decreased birth weights and skin discoloration which later faded.

FDA says the rice oil in that case was contaminated at very high PCB levels of 2,000-3,000 parts per million. In comparison, Edwards says, FDA's safe contamination level for fish is five parts per million.

Recent testing has uncovered PCB levels higher than five parts per million in Lake Michigan coho salmon, a development which has prompted consternation and coho salmon sale controls from state officials.

PCB contamination of 250,000 chickens and turkeys in North Carolina, Minnesota and New York prompted the government to seize the processed fowl and stop their distribution to markets.

Eggs, fish and other meats apparently are susceptible to PCB contamination, although the FDA says it has not found dangerous levels of contamination in the vast majority of food tests it has conducted.

The danger, Edwards insists, has been overated and does not warrant "national health alerts" or "crisis headlines."

"The FDA," he said, "rejects the need and feasibility, as some have proposed, of an outright ban on PCB," and is taking "positive steps" to deal with the situation.

For one thing, he said, Monsanto Co., the nation's largest PCB maker, has agreed to sell the compounds for non-food related porposes only.

The National Cash Register Co., he went on, is not using PCB in its carbon paper, nor is it using carbonless carbon paper which contains PCB in making recycled paper intended for food packaging.

And the FDA itself is stepping up its surveillance of the food industry — and insisting the industry police itself more stringently — to prevent PCB contamination of foods, he said.

Fish Get More PCB Southward

LANSING—(UPI)—The Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) said Wednesday that chubs taken from southern Lake Michigan have polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) levels four times as high as those taken from the northern part of the lake.

"From Holland south, chubs show average PCB levels of 5.4 parts per million," said Dr. George Whitehead, MDA director of consumer protection. "Chubs from Holland north to Ludington average 3.9 ppm. Above Ludington, the average drops to 1.3 ppm."

The Federal Food and Drug Administration has recommended the five ppm level as safe for human consumption.

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