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Sick-Chicken Crisis

Sir: Your editorial, "Sick Chickens" paraphrases recent statements of Congressman Ryan of New York with respect to our handling of the recent PCB problem in broilers. Included are allegations that chickens were sold after we knew of the situation, that our investigatory procedures were too slow, and that we showed undue casualness toward the consumer.

The facts are these. A North Carolina broiler producing firm informed us on Monday, July 19, that it had experienced a decline in hatchability of its eggs, investigated the matter, and had attributed it to fish meal purchased from a Wilmington (N.C.) firm. (This firm, which is not under our jurisdiction, had closed its doors the preceding Friday.) We immediately dispatched one of our top men to North Carolina to coordinate the residue testing of all the producer's birds. Testing has continued since that date and all lots of birds showing residues above acceptable levels have been destroyed.

On July 22, we received from the Food and Drug Administration a listing of all firms to whom the suspect plant had delivered fish meal since the PCB leakage began. We immediately took steps to notify each of these firms of the problem, and immediately began an accelerated residue collection problem in all federally inspected poultry slaughter plants in the affected 10-state area. Samples from all such plants were on their way to our laboratories on July 23, within hours after we received the FDA listing. This accelerated testing program continues today, and will be continued as long as necessary.

In my judgment, our meat and poultry inspection personnel responded in commendable fashion to a problem which was in no way of their making. They carried out a plan of action quickly but deliberately, with fairness to all concerned, and with protection for the consumer.

The easy response would have been to recall all poultry products from all supermarket shelves throughout the United States. But this was unnecessary, and would have resulted in a tremendous loss of wholesome food, an unreasonable indictment of the entire poultry industry, and devastating financial losses from which many persons and firms could never have recovered.

So far, 88,000 birds have been destroyed — all from one producer, and all as a result of tests performed before the birds were even headed for market. No other samples from the approximately 250 slaughter plants being tested have shown unacceptable residues.

This was a tragic situation, but it would have been even more tragic had our personnel not reacted in a responsible way. Contrary to the allegations, they reacted quickly, but with due concern for everyone involved. The immediate clamor was that we condemn poultry everywhere. Had we done so, we could have avoided charges of being "casual toward consumers." In fact, we would have been praised. That would have been the easy and popular response, and it would have avoided critical comments from Congressman Ryan and others. But it would also have been wrong, for how could we have justified such action today, two weeks later, when laboratory tests have called for the condemnation of only a fraction of one per cent of all the birds being marketed?

We chose to make the hard decision, but I believe it was also the right decision.

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Washington.

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