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FDA Rejects Ban on PCB

By JOAN KRAMER

WASHINGTON (FINS) — Food & Drug Commissioner Charles E. Felt last week rejected an outright ban on the industrial chemical PCB. He said "positive steps," not "sensitive headlines," are the way to deal with its potential danger to public health.

"Public confusion has created public alarm and a feeling of still another crisis in the food supply," he told a news conference. "I know the confusion is unnecessary and I believe the alarm is greater than the facts will justify."

Rep. William F. Ryan (D., N.Y.), who introduced the bill to ban distribution of PCB in interstate commerce, promptly replied: "I agree that sensitive headlines are not the answer — what is needed is prompt action and full disclosure of any food contamination" by the FDA.

Ryan referred to an FDA finding last June that PCB in recycled-cardboard food containers had been migrating in unacceptable levels to some foods. FDA rejected the Grocery Manufacturers of America and the American Paper Institute to this problem Sept. 14, but did not back the facts public until last Monday.

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FDA Head, Bars PCB Ban, Asks 'Positive Steps'

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Said Ryan: "FDA seems more concerned about the image of American industry than the level of public knowledge of the wholesomeness of its food."

Based on the June finding, one of the "positive steps" FDA is taking is a high-priority survey of 15 food categories packaged in recycled cardboard containing PCB. Food packaging is a major use of recycled paper, which the Government has encouraged to reduce waste.

FDA acknowledged last week that the PCB discovery could spark a conflict between environmental and public health goals, like the recent policy reversal over phosphate detergents.

The food-additive order for pulp from reclaimed fiber prohibits the use of used paper and paperboard which bears or contains any poisonous or deleterious substance for food packaging material.

Reporting on the extent of food contamination in its survey launched Sept. 4, FDA may restrict the use of recycled paper containing PCB for food packaging or set PCB guidelines for paperboard and food products.

In the area of "positive steps" so far, FDA said Monsanto Chemical Co., the nation's only producer of PCB,

has promised to stop selling it to food and food processing plants. In addition, National Cash Register discontinued its use in "carbonless" cash register paper, the primary PCB source in recycled paper, last June.

However, FDA revealed a further qualification: "We know that these chemicals have important home-resistant properties and are properly used, directly as pest Government and industry in protecting the consumer against fire," declared Edwards.

In testing made public last week, FDA said it had found low level PCB residues in 40 of 15,000 raw agricultural commodities samples over the last 22 months. That of these were fish. A further market-basket survey turned up PCB levels ranging from a trace to 0.30 part per million in 22 of 720 samples. Seventeen were meat, fish and poultry. The agency has set "action levels" for PCB at 3 PPM in fish and poultry, 0.5 PPM for eggs and 0.2 PPM for milk.

In the June survey, FDA found 10.4 PPM of PCB in cereal products. When the individual components of the cereal were tested, FDA traced the residues to shredded wheat biscuits (up to 21 PPM) and subsequently to shredded wheat packaging.

It was later learned that the packaging firm used about 80 per cent recycled paper to manufacture paperboard containers. The firm's paperboard showed PCB levels ranging from 1.7 to 423 PPM.

Analysis of 28 packaged-food samples under the firm's paperboard uncovered PCB in nine samples. Corn meal, spaghetti, mince, grits, mixed berry cereal, nougat dings and pancake mix contained 0.1 to 3 PPM.

"We are not aware of any foods contaminated with significant levels of regular and consistent basis. If such foods were identified, a much lower action level would be needed to prevent unwarranted long term exposure," said Dr. Robert Kolbye, Jr., deputy director. FDA bars of foods.

Food categories being checked include crackers, brown cereals and related products; macaroni and noodle products; pretzels, chips and specialty items; ready-to-eat breakfast cereals; prepared mixes including cake, pancakes and biscuits; dried milk, and dried meat products.

Also: Dried desserts and pudding mixes, instant unflavored gelatin, infant cereals, cookies, refrigerated uncooked specialties, rice, oatmeal and flours; chocolate and candy products; ground cheese and cheese products; dried fruits and frozen fruit juices.

Dr. Edwards concluded: "We still have as many questions as answers. We know that PCB is a potential but not an immediate health hazard. But we do not know if long-term exposure to PCB might affect human health and we cannot explain its inconsistent presence in the environment."