Panel Is Told How Chemical Tainted Fish in Ala. Creek

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Fish from a creek in Alabama contained levels of a toxic contaminant 72 times the tolerance limit set by the Food and Drug Administration, a Senate subcommittee was told yesterday.

The contaminant is the chemical PCB, the DDT-like compound that recently was found in fish meal fed to chickens. While the Agriculture Department said that chickens fed the meal were safe, one producer destroyed 88,000 of them rather than let them reach the market.

The tolerance level set by FDA is five parts per million. The tested chickens showed levels of two p.p.m.

The subcommittee was told the PCB level of spotted bass caught in Choccolocco Creek, Ala. was as high as 360 p.p.m., or 72 times the tolerance limit. Other bass and catfish in the creek and in Logan Martin Lake, into which the creek empties, ranged from 10 to 127.7 p.p.m.

The information was obtained by the Senate Environment Subcommittee from the Alabama Game and Fish Division. The tests were made more than a year ago for the FDA but the results were not made public until yesterday.

The subcommittee is holding hearings on legislation to control the use of toxic substances such as PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls).

PCB is a class of industrial chemicals used until recently in a variety of consumer products. Because of its toxicity it is now limited by the only manufacturer, the Monsanto Co., to use as insulating fluid in electrical equipment and as heat transfer fluids in closed heating systems. The fish meal fed the chickens was contaminated by a leak in the heating system where it was processed.

Alabama officials do not know how the fish became tainted but suspect the sewage discharge from a Monsanto plant through the Anniston, Ala., treatment plant into the creek. Monsanto issued a statement saying that it would have no comment until it submits testimony to the subcommittee at a later date.

The effect of PCB on humans is a matter of conjecture but tests have shown that it can cause shell-thinning in eggs, lowered fertility in birds, and liver damage in test animals, Robert Risebrough, a research ecologist and professor at the University of California at Berkley, told the subcommittee.

The real culprit, he said, may not be PCB but other chemical compounds, chlorinated dibenzodioxins or chlorinated dibenzofurans, in PCB preparations.

Occupational exposure to PCB substances has produced chloracne, a severe skin disease. There also was an outbreak of skin disease among 300 persons in Japan who used rice oil for cooking contaminated with PCB or one of the compounds, he testified.

The concentration of PCB in the rice oil was about 200 p.p.m. On the basis of this information, Risebrough said he would not advise eating the fish caught in Choccolocco Creek.

He pointed out that like DDT compounds PCB is insoluble in water but highly soluble in oils and fats. It is highly resistant to degradation by heat or by the biological processes that degrade most chemicals. As a result PCB remains in the environment. Much of it will eventually reach the ocean and could in time contaminate seafood, he said.

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