Food Inspection Agencies Under Fire

By Nancy L. Ross

Consumer advocate Ralph Nader accused the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture yesterday of "lulling the public deceptively" in order to take the pressure off them.

In testimony before the House Commerce Subcommittee on Public Health and Environment, Nader said the food inspection agencies seemed wedded to the "all is well" and "the public is adequately protected principles of public relations." The subcommittee, chaired by Rep. Paul G. Rogers (D-Fla.) is investigating food recall procedures in the wake of the recent botulism scare caused by contaminated Bon Vivant and Campbell soup and the discovery of eggs containing excessive levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

Since 1925 more than 700 people have died from botulism in home canned foods, reports the National Canner Association. In the same period there have been only five deaths from commercially canned food and about the same number from other kinds of commercially prepared food.

Nader charged the agencies with dereliction in making full and timely disclosures of possible health hazards. Such incidents of nondisclosure, his testimony said, "when they are ultimately brought to light, [are] eroding public confidence in food inspection agencies."

Nader disputed previous testimony by FDA Commissioner Charles Edwards, who had defended his agency's policy of not "deluging the public with scare items based on our suspicion . . ." quoted The New York Times because public reaction is always an overreaction. He quoted The New York Times as saying the public had taken the Campbell scare calmly. Also, Dr. Edwards told the committee last Friday the FDA saw "no imminent threat to the safety of the food supply or the public health" from PCBs. For this reason the FDA did not move on the tainted eggs until their existence was revealed in the press. Nader claimed the as yet unknown, possible cumulative and long-term effects of PCBs on human health should been sufficient grounds for action.

Nader said a change of attitude by the agencies was as important as increased resources and manpower in any reform of food recall procedures. However, he agreed with many of the changes proposed by Dr. Edwards last Friday and supported this week by the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the National Association of Food Chains and the National Canners Association.

In addition he also spoke in favor of an independent food inspection agency devoted to the protection of the consumer "that is not confounded at every turn with agonizing conflicts of constituencies." Citing the "ingenious talents of modern chemistry to make food easy to chew, palatable and visually presentable," Nader called for protesting in the case of artificial foods.

Nader suggested a possible warning label on cans to alert people not to eat them if they become swollen and backed putting the manufacturer's name on the can.

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