

HEALTH SIGNIFICANCE OF PCB CONTAMINATION BECOMES ISSUE

Ralph Nader and Food and Drugs Commissioner Charles Edwards disagreed sharply last week over the public health significance of chicken and egg contamination by polychlorinated biphenyls, as both FDA and the Agriculture Department continued the monitoring and holding of poultry and eggs involved in the contamination. An exchange of letters also involved USDA.

USDA detained 53,430 lbs. of frozen egg products in federally-inspected plants after finding PCB levels above an 0.5 p.p.m. FDA guideline. PCBs were found in concentrations up to 2.2 p.p.m.

The four plants were Central Carolina Farms and Chick Haven Eggs, both in North Carolina; and C. F. Saver and Dean Farms, Inc., both in South Carolina.

In the Nader-Edwards disagreement over the public health significance, Nader charged that FDA had not informed USDA nor the public about "widespread contamination of shell eggs." He demanded:

"In view of the above and of the seriousness of the danger presented by this contamination, I urge you to declare an immediate, official public health alert, to fully and immediately inform the public of the nature and extent of this danger, and to take other steps . . ."

Commissioner Edwards replied August 17 to two Nader letters:

"We do not agree that there is a need at this time for declaring a public health alert."

A background discussion of FDA action following the discovery of PCB contamination at the plant of a fish meal manufacturer, East Coast Terminal, Inc. (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, July 26, Page 42) elaborated the agency's viewpoint:

"Based on the most recent scientific information the potential health hazard is from continued consumption of PCBs over a period of time. Interim guidelines established for use in this specific contamination case provide an adequate margin of safety for the short term exposure expected to occur."

FDA had moved the week ending August 13 to seize more than 75,000 eggs from Central Carolina Farms (which stopped shipping on August 10) and from three consignees: Valley Poultry and Produce and Bisese and Console, both of Norfolk, Va. and Metropolitan Poultry and Egg, Washington. There were no eggs to be seized at the latter firm (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, Aug. 16, Pages 2 and 3).

Two other samples above an 0.5 p.p.m. FDA guideline for eggs were found by the agency at Coastal Broilers, Glennville, Ga., where the eggs were being held for hatchery purposes, and Holly Farms Hatchery, North Wilkesboro, N.C., which had shipped all of its products within North Carolina. State officials have been advised

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The two letters from Nader gave the consumer advocate a chance to reiterate his promotion for a separate Consumer Safety Agency (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, July 19, Page 25 and June 14, Page 15). He said:

"The failures discussed in my letters speak for themselves. If the Department is unable or unwilling to bend its best efforts toward the protection of the defenseless consumer against chemical and microbial contaminants of the food supply, then it should support the transfer of this function to an agency that can do so with vigor and enthusiasm."

PCB contamination of catfish feed, also resulting from the East Coast terminal incident, was brought up in both the Nader letters and the answer from Commissioner Edwards, as was an incident of PCB contamination of fish caught in Alabama streams.

FDA seized 900 50-lb. bags of catfish feed shipped by Ralston Purina when PCB was found in a range of 0.6 p.p.m. to 4.5 p.p.m. Two additional lots were being considered for seizure, FDA said, and other lots had been withheld for sale by the company.

Calling attention in an August 11 letter to the fishmeal contamination, Nader said in an August 13 letter that:

"Finally I called to your attention, among other things, FDA's failure to immediately notify USDA when it discovered the recent PCB contamination of fish meal and urged you to direct your employees to communicate to USDA and the public future evidence of contamination affecting meat and poultry promptly upon discovery of such evidences."

FDA "answered" this charge in general terms, with a statement by Commissioner Edwards that FDA is confident that its actions "have been fully responsive to the problem" and with a background statement as to the facts in the fish meal incident. It was disclosed that 11 samples of catfish which had been fed contaminated meal contained PCB residues within a 5 p.p.m. guideline, ranging from 0.3-3.0 p.p.m.

As for the Alabama fish incident, FDA pointed out that the agency's sampling program had discovered the incident in the first place. This had not been brought out in the Congressional hearings at which the incident was disclosed recently (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, August 9, Page 7).

The agency also noted: "FDA had no jurisdiction over these fish. The results were given at the time to the responsible state official for possible action."

In a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin, also dated Aug. 13, Nader pointed out FDA's seizures and said these have "grave implications" for USDA. He said:

(1) Despite an alert to USDA "as early as July 19" and "the further fact that Mr. Peter Schuck and Mr. Harrison Wellford constantly apprised your staff of the danger to egg pro-

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ducts beginning almost three weeks ago, we are informed by USDA sources that testing only began two or three days ago and that no results have yet been received." He called the number of samples "absurdly inadequate."

(2) Clayton Yeutter, Administrator of USDA's Consumer and Marketing Service, reportedly told a Congressional aide as of 3:30 p.m. August 13 that he "knew nothing about any PCB contamination of eggs."

(3) USDA had done nothing about an implied "need for the immediate destruction of the hens which laid those eggs." FDA apparently is doing nothing, either, Nader said, continuing: "Yet so far as one can tell, there is nothing standing between the public and contaminated eggs and egg products but the inadequate and lethargic sampling programs which have already failed to stem the flow of these goods to market."

(4) Despite "explicit requests" for test data from USDA's sampling program for PCBs in chicken, turkeys and hogs, the data have not been made public. "Nor has USDA explained, Nader wrote, "how 400 samples per week can, under the circumstances, be considered satisfactory protection of the consumer."

As in one of the FDA letters, Nader concluded his letter to Secretary Hardin with the suggestion that CMS should be transferred to an agency that can protect the consumer "with vigor and enthusiasm."

USDA handling of a recent "Genoa Salami" staphylococcus incident was criticized also (See FOOD CHEMICAL NEWS, July 26, Page 42). Nader wrote:

"We are informed by reliable sources that USDA has wholly failed to inform at least some state departments of health as to what actions they should take in implementing the recall, and that in at least one instance, USDA has wholly failed to even respond to urgent requests for assistance by a state department of health.

"Evidently USDA's aloofness from the problems which its inspection failures have imposed on the public and on state authorities has produced drastic results; according to the New Jersey department of health, the 'recalled' products were still on the shelves of 17 retail establishments in 12 municipalities on August 12. That this is what is to be expected from a voluntary recall program is painfully obvious to everyone but, apparently, USDA."

Beginning last week, USDA announced it was increasing its testing for PCBs as "an added assurance to consumers." Describing a stepped-up sampling program in 10 states of all lots of laying hens, breeder hens and turkeys, USDA said:

"Any producer of the specified types of poultry can present an affidavit with the poultry he brings for slaughter, stating that they were not fed any of the contaminated fish meal. The poultry may then be slaughtered and marketed subject to sample testing by USDA "

The next day, USDA announced the detention of the six lots of egg products where PCBs were found over the 0.5 p.p.m. level. USDA said all egg products - liquid, frozen or dried eggs - produced in the Southeast area of the U.S. would be tested and would not be released until found not to exceed guidelines.

PESTICIDE MONITORING LISTS EXPANDED

All U.S. agencies charged with monitoring pesticide residues - primarily the Department of Agriculture, Food and Drug Administration, and Environmental Protection Agency - have agreed upon expansion of both primary and secondary monitoring lists.

Five new chemicals appear on the primary list, and one chemical has been moved from the secondary to the primary list, bringing the total for this list to 31. Eleven new chemicals appear on the secondary list, more than tripling the total number of the list.

The new list was published in the June issue of the Pesticides Monitoring Journal published by the President's Cabinet Committee on the Environment. The first monitoring list - amounting to a priority testing schedule for the agencies - was published a year ago. New chemicals appearing on the primary list are:

Atrazine - 2-chloro-4-(ethylamino)-6-(isopropylamino)-s-triazine (moved from secondary to primary monitoring lists); Captan - N-((trichloromethyl)thio)-4-cyclohexene-1,2-dicarboximide; Dicamba - 3,6-dichloro-o-anisic acid; Nitralin - 4-(methylsulfonyl)-2,6-dinitro-N,N-dipropylaniline; PCNB - pentachloronitrobenzene; and Trifluralin - α,α,α -trifluoro-2,6-dinitro-N,N-dipropyl-p-toluidine.

The Journal article by Milton S. Schechter of USDA's Agricultural Research Service noted that appearance of chemicals on the lists result from (1) extent or volume of usage; (2) degree of hazard to man, fish and wildlife; and (3) degree of persistence.

New chemicals on the secondary list are:

DCNA - 2,6-dichloro-4-nitroaniline; Carbaryl - 1-naphthyl methylcarbamate; Diazinon - O,O-diethyl O-2-isopropyl-6-methyl-4-pyrimidinyl phosphorothioate; Diuron - 3-(3,4-dichlorophenyl)-1,1-dimethylurea; Fenac - (2,3,6-trichlorophenyl) acetic acid; Fluometuron - 1,1-dimethyl-3-(α,α,α -trifluoro-m-tolyl)urea; Lead-containing pesticides such as lead arsenate; Linuron - 3-(3,4-dichlorophenyl)-1-methoxy-1-methylurea; PCP - pentachlorophenol; Propanil - 3',4'-dichloropropionanilide; and TBA - 2,3,6-trichlorobenzoic acid, usually available as mixed isomers.

In addition to the pesticides, the monitoring list includes two "special chemicals" - PCBs and polychloro-dibenzo-p-dioxins (of which one form, TCDD, has appeared as a contaminant of early formulations of 2,4,5-T).