FDA Considers Rule To Cut Level of PCB Permissible in Fish

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Industrial Chemical's Toxicity May Also Lead Agency to A Total Ban in Any Food

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL *Staff Reporter*

WASHINGTON—The Food and Drug Administration said it is considering lowering the permissible level of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, in fish because of increased concern with the chemical's toxicity.

Temporary FDA rules allow a PCB tolerance of five parts per million for the edible parts of fish shipped in interstate commerce. In a statement of policy, the agency said it isn't only considering lowering the limit but also will examine a proposal by environmental groups that would eventually ban any PCBs in fish or other food.

PCBs are a class of widely used industrial chemicals, employed mainly to transfer heat in electrical equipment. They are highly stable, persist in the environment and have become a contaminant of the food supply. They have been shown to cause skin disease, excessive eye discharge and liver problems in humans.

The FDA said surveys showed that fish caught in the Hudson River from Fort Edward, N.Y., southward, are likely to contain PCBs in excess of current limits. General Electric Co. plants have been discharging the chemicals at Fort Edward and Hudson Falls, N.Y. Coho and chinook salmon caught in Lake Ontario are also likely to contain excessive PCB levels, the FDA said.

The FDA said it supported regulatory action Wednesday by New York State authorities to ban most commercial fishing on part of the Hudson and all fishing in one 40-mile section. The agency also supported warnings to sport fishermen to restrict their intake of fish caught on parts of the Hudson and salmon caught in Lake Ontario.

The FDA noted that most fish for human consumption come from salt water and these fish are largely uncontaminated with PCBs. Fish sampled at commercial establishments contain an average of less than 0.2 parts per million of PCBs, which is substantially below the level that poses a risk to health, the FDA maintained.

In contrast, the agency's evaluation of fish caught in the Hudson showed 53 out of 68 samples contained PCBs in excess of five parts per million and the average level was 31.3 parts. In Lake Ontario, 28 of 33 samples of coho and chinook salmon exceeded the limit, four samples of lake trout ranged from 10 to 15 parts per million, and other species of fish were at or below the limit.

In Albany, New York State officials said their samples contained an average of 14.7 parts per million, but at least one eel sampled had 186 parts per million.