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Millions of Chickens Tainted

By Hank Burchard
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The Agriculture Department conceded yesterday that millions of chickens fed on fish meal contaminated with a DDT-like chemical have been sold in stores in the Washington area and much of the rest of the country.

The chemical, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB), leaked into fish meal produced at a Wilmington, N. C., plant between April 30 and mid-July. From there it was widely distributed to poultry growers and hog raisers, mixed into up to 800,000 tons of feed.

Some 35 million broiling chickens alone are sent to market each week from the 12 states where feed containing the fish meal was sold. How many of those chickens consumed the contaminated feed and how much PCB was in their flesh when sold "cannot be known," Dr. Clayton Yeutter, chief of Agriculture's Consumer and Marketing Survey, said yesterday.

Last Friday, Dr. Fred Fullerton of Agriculture's Consumer and Marketing Service, which had withheld announcement of the PCB affair for a week, said there was "no evidence that any contaminated chickens have reached any consumer."

Dr. Yeutter explained the apparent contradiction this way:

"There was no statement that chickens fed on the contaminated fish meal had not reached the market. The statement was that there was no evidence—and there still is none—that any of the marketed chickens contained more PCB than the 5 parts per million considered acceptable by the government."

Asked if there was any evidence that chickens containing more than 5 p.p.m. had not been marketed, Dr. Yeutter said an annoucement on the results of field tests would be made by the department today.

In any case, Dr. Yeutter said, "no chickens fed contaiminated meal are on the market now and none will be released for market."

Asked if the same could be said for frozen chickens and chicken meat used in the production of soups, hot dogs and other foods, Dr. Yeutter referred the question to Dr. Fullerton, who could not be reached yesterday afternoon or last night.

The effects of PCB upon humans, if any, are not known. It has been shown to cause low fertility in fowl and liver damage in rats, and is thought by many scientists to be a serious long-term danger to man and animals.

Dr. Yeutter said the public "should not be unduly alarmed" over the PCB case. "It is not worthwhile to worry the consumer now about something he ate a few weeks ago. It hasn't affected my consumption of chicken. As far as we know every chicken sitting on every shelf is safe and wholesome."

Rep. William Fitts Ryan (D-N.Y.), who Monday filed a bill that would outlaw all production or use of PCB in the United States, said yesterday he was "shocked and outraged" by the government's handling of the case.

"They're just playing guessing games," he said. "The setting of the 5 parts per million standard was purely arbitrary in the first place. From all we can find, the action of Agriculture and FDA (Food and Drug Administration) has been insufficient to say the least.

"They've hushed up earlier PCB contamination cases and delayed announcement in this case until the chickens had been sold. This is unconscionable neglect in a situation of staggering potential harm."

Rep. Ryan said he would call for hearings not only on his bill but "into Agriculture and FDA's conduct."

Used since before World War II until recently in a wide range of products, PCB has made its way into the worldwide web of life and has been found in fish, wild birds (up to 1,000 p.p.m.), human fat and human mother's milk (up to .06 p.p.m.).

Monsanto Corp., sole producers of PCB in the U.S. and in the United Kingdom, last year stopped all sales of the chemical except for "closed-system" uses in heavy electrical equipment and industrial heating equipment such as the sterilizer in the Wilmington plant where the fish meal was contaminated.

In that case, PCB leaked from the machinery into the fish meal undetected for about 12 weeks. The discovery was made only after one of the plant's customers found that his chickens were sickening and becoming infertile.

The customer, Holly Farms, Inc., a major supplier of chickens to Washington markets, tested the feed, then notified Monsanto, which traced the source and alerted FDA. Holly Farms destroyed 77,000 chickens.

The contamination went undetected until that time because no agency of the government regularly tests marketed flesh for PCB.

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