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Farm News

Senators Tentatively Back Dairy PCB Indemnity Plan

WASHINGTON-(UPI) — The senate agriculture committee has tentatively approved an indemnity program for dairy farmers whose milk may become contaminated—through no fault of the farmer—with residues of a chlorinated hydrocarbon chemical called PCB.

The program, if approved by congress, is expected to cost comparatively little.

This is because sales of PCBs for use in silo-sealing compounds on dairy farms were halted nearly three years ago by the sole U.S. manufacturer of the chemical, Monsanto Chemical Co. The material has not been available for use in silos since mid-1970.

Agriculture department experts say problems growing out of use of PCBs arose several years ago on scattered farms in a few states, including parts of Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee.

On these farms, a compound including PCBs was applied to the inner walls of concrete silos before scientists discovered the chemical could migrate from the walls into the silage fed to dairy cows.

Several farmers in Ohio, as a result, were forced to halt marketing of their milk for a time until PCB residues dropped to within safe tolerance levels.

Because PCBs are extremely long lasting, the National Milk Producers Federation pointed out that silos treated with the chemical because its use was halted could still contaminate feed in the future.

The legislation pending in the senate committee would not repay farmers for losses suffered in the past, but it would indemnify producers if PCB residues appear in their milk in the future.

G. F. Fries, an agriculture department scientist, said in a study of the problem last fall that there was "no reason to be particularly concerned about the effects of the residues on the health of the general public."

Although residues above a low "guideline" limit are banned in market milk, Fries said any contaminated milk which escaped detection was being "greatly diluted" with clean milk. Even a consumer drinking only milk from a contaminated herd would need to consume it steadily for 15 to 20 years to get the quantity of PCB which—when consumed in a single, concentrated dose in rice oil—produced problems including acne and eye discharge in a group of Japanese consumers, Fries added.

Fries said even this comparison probably overstates the degree of risk to American consumers since the PBCs involved in the Japanese incident "may have contained highly toxic contaminants."

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