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Chicken consumers don't need to worry, say officials of Food and Drug Administration.

Where Did Poison Come From? It's Million Dollar Quiz For Poultrymen

By LLOYD FERRISS

What went wrong and where?

This is the question -- still unanswered -- that for one month has plagued investigators attempting to track down the source of a highly toxic chemical that somehow entered a batch of broiler feed and contaminated 1.4 million Maine chickens.

Indications are that final answers may be weeks or months away.

The chemical responsible for the contamination, a DDT-like substance called polychlorinated biphenyls, commonly known as PCB, could have entered the chicken feed in any one of a number of industrial plants in this country or aborad.

In Washington the deputy associate commissioner for compliance with the federal Food and Drug Administration, R. E. Duggan, gave no explanation for what has turned out to be the largest outbreak ever to take place in the United States.

"We are still continuing our investigation but the last report I had indicated no definite source had been found. Quite frankly, I don't know where it originated."

Meanwhile sales of chicken in Maine plumneted at the height of the scare by 50 per cent and losses to the state's broiler industry climbed to the million-dollar mark. A poultry economist for the University of Maine in Orono describes the contamination as "a financial disaster" to the broilermen.

Throughout the scare the United States Department of Agriculture, followed by the commissioner of the Maine Department of Agriculture — and even the state legislature — have taken pains to assure the public that chicken on the market is entirely free of PCB contamination.

For a variety of reasons these boasts may very likely be taken at face value: it is extremely unlikely that contaminated chicken ever did reach the supermarket shelves.

For one thing, the feed which contaiminated the birds was a "starter ration" fed to young broilers shortly after they came from the hatchery. Discovery of the first PCB-poisoned flock, which took place on Feb. 18, came when the chickens were just four weeks old and well under marketable age. From that time to the present the consumer protection division of both the state and federal departments of agriculture have taken rather drastic action.

According to Dr. Peter Clavola, head of the USDA consumer and marketing service for Maine meat and poultry, federal inspectors have been monitoring the state's broiler farms on a 20-hour per day schedule six days a week. Flocks are tested during their growth period on the farms, at the time of collection and finally at the poultry processing plant.

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Poison Is Million Dollar Riddle For Poultrymen

"There is no danger to the public whatsoever," Dr. Ciavola maintains.

Backing the inspectors in Maine are USDA laboratories in Boston and Washington, where hundreds of tissue samples are analyzed daily from shipments flown from airports in Augusta and Bangor. When contamination is discovered, Dr. Ciavola explained, the affected birds are either incinerated on the farms or buried in pits 10 feet deep. The USDA reports 1,250,008 birds destroyed in this manner.

While the USDA continues its monitoring program, FDA investigators have come up with some promising though in no way conclusive leads.

According to Arthur Beebe, regional Food and Drug director for New England, the contamination has been traced back to a single batch of feed mixed at a Ralston-Purina mill in Thorndike on or about last Jan. 25. The feed, later distributed to the Penobscot Poultry Company in Belfast and the Fort Halifax Poultry Company in Winslow, caused the PCB outbreak in these plants.

Beebe cautioned, however, that contamination at the Ralston-Purina mill probably was not its fault. The PCB, he said, probably came in one of any number of feed ingredients shipped to Maine from out of state and mixed into feed at the modern, computer-operated mill with a 600-ton per day capacity.

The mill, sold in February to new operators and now managed as the Mid-Central Fish Company, bought from foreign as well as domestic sources, which made it especially difficult to back-track to the origin of the industrial accident, said Beebe.

"One of the raw materials used in the feed was fish meal that came to this country from Peru. We have notified the State Department and I'm certain they would notify the Peruvian government of the problem. We're not accusing the Peruvians, but this is one thing we have to look into."

R. E. Duggan, in his capacity as associate commissioner for compliance with the FDA, places no special emphasis on the possible poisoning by Peruvian fish meal.

"We have looked at imported fish meal regularly over the past six to nine months and have not found any particular problem there. I certainly wouldn't want to indict Peruvian fish meal or anyone else's fish meal without some facts."

Complicating attempts to trace PCB is the extremely widespread use of the chemical. Manufactured by the Monsanto Chemical Co., it is used in plastics, printing ink, insulators and hydraulic fluid. It is also pumped through heating coils in some industrial cooking plants as a heat transfer medium.

One PCB outbreak took place in North Carolina poultry flocks last spring when an industrial stove cooking fish meal developed a leak. An outbreak in another part of the country occurred after a power company used left-over transformer fluid containing PCB as a herbicide on an electrical line right of way. Some cows grazed on the right of way and the chemical turned up in milk.

According to Beebe, there are no recorded cases of human PCB poisoning in the United States. He explained, however, that experiments with rats indicate that 100 parts per million of PCB cause genetic defects and an increase in the size of the liver and thyroid and that long-term, low level exposure to PCB could be harmful to humans.

Among the mysteries facing officials unraveling the Maine PCB outbreak is the question of how a relatively small amount of feed funneled through the mill at Thorndike reached 2.4 million chickens on about 100 broiler farms.

The outbreaks at the Penobscot Poultry Co. and Fort Halifax Poultry Co. are clear to trace since both used the Thorndike Mill's feed. Maplewood Poultry Co. of Belfast did not, however, buy from the mill, through both Dr. Ciavola and A. E. Watson, director of consumer protection for the Maine Department of Agriculture, confirm that the company did experience a PCB outbreak.

The widespread contamination has given rise to one theory that chicken guts from one or more broiler flocks, ordinarily recycled back into feed, may have carried the contamination to additional flocks of broilers. Watson says investigators are at least considering this possibility, but others, including a meat and poultry inspector of the USDA in Washington, flatly discount recontamination by the cycling of waste.

While the PCB outbreak continues and public confidence in poultry products wavers, it is clear that the burden of the economic crisis rests largely on the poultryman. Yet a survey of markets indicates that the groceryman isn't necessarily feeling the pinch.

At Hannaford Brothers in Portland, a grocery outlet supplying 70 stores in Maine and New Hampshire, meat buyer Roland LaVallee said, "People who ordinarily buy chicken switched to pork or hamburger or, if they wanted poultry, turkey. Actually we possibly increased profit because the other meat is more expensive. Nobody is going to go without meat because they can't get chicken."

How the Maine poultry industry will ultimately fare is unknown, though poultry extension economist Frank D. Reed of the University of Maine at Orono believes it will weather the disaster with no lasting effects.

"This is a scare that will die out and people will forget. It should be reassuring to the public that the program was found quickly and that the Food and Drug Administration took such drastic action."

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