60,000 Tainted Eggs Sold Here in 2 Weeks

By Robert F. Levey
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More than 60,000 eggs containing dangerous amounts of the potentially lethal chemical PCB were sold in the Washington area two weekends ago, federal officials said yesterday.

The eggs were distributed to a suburban Virginia grocery store and several local hotels and restaurants, and are presumed to have been eaten, officials said.

The eggs originally were among about half a million throughout the Southeast found last week to contain polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) —a DDT-like chemical used generally to coat machinery.

Of that half million, the Food and Drug Administration seized or embargoed all but the Washington-bound ones, spokesman Jack Walden said yesterday.

"By the time we could track the things, they had moved into the (Washington area) public," Walden said.

The eggs contained between .5 and 1.5 parts of PCB per million, Walden said FDA tests had shown. FDA guidelines call any level above .5 in eggs potentially hazardous.

However, Walden, medical authorities and the local distributor of the eggs—Metropolitan Poultry and Egg Co. of 210 E St. SW—all stressed that sickness or death in humans could only be caused by prolonged and prodigious consumption of PCB-tainted eggs.

"That much PCB in the one shipment is like a drop in a tank car," Walden said. "The only reason .5 is the guideline is because technology won't let us detect much less than that."

Metropolitan bought 5,004 dozen of the tainted eggs on Aug. 4 from Central Carolina Farms in Durham, N.C., Metropolitan Manager Charles Willard said yesterday.

On the same day, and from the same shipment, the FDA took several test samples while the eggs were still in Durham. But the FDA did not prohibit the shipment from leaving for Washington, and "never notified us of the testing being done," Willard said.

The eggs arrived here Aug. 5, Willard said, "and we innocently sold them." Willard said 3,800 dozen went to "one small, chain grocery in the Virginia suburbs," which he refused to identify. The others, he said, were sold to several local hotels and restaurants.

"Eggs move pretty fast," Willard observed. "I assume they're all eaten by now."

On Aug. 9, Walden said, the FDA finished testing its Durham samples. The tests showed PCB levels above FDA guidelines in 27 of 75 samples.

Realizing that some of the tainted samples were from the shipment that had been bought by Metropolitan, FDA inspectors tried to stop distribution. But they were four days too late.

The other tainted eggs were still in warehouses, so the FDA was able to stop distribution of 75,000 eggs in Norfolk and about 375,000 more elsewhere in North Carolina, Walden said.

According to the FDA's investigation, which Walden said began in April, the tainted eggs were laid by hens that had eaten fish meal containing PCB.

The fish meal had been tainted because PCB, which was used as a cooling agent in the machinery of a meal manufacturer, East Coast Terminal Co. of Wilmington, N.C., had been leaking into the meal since April, the FDA said.

Both Central Carolina and East Coast have been ordered to suspend business by the FDA.

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