FDA SETS FINAL TOLERANCE LEVELS FOR PCBS IN FOODS

Food and Drug Administration has set new lower tolerances for permissible levels of polychlorinated biphenyls in fish, poultry and dairy products, an action that FDA anticipates will result in a $6-million loss to the commercial fishing industry. FDA's June 28 action ends three years of debate over how much PCB should be allowed in these products. The final tolerances become effective August 28 and will apply to all foods shipped in interstate commerce.

A key feature of the new final tolerances for PCBs, is FDA's decision to lower allowable PCB levels in fish from 5 parts per million down to 2 ppm, despite commercial fishing industry pressure not to drop this tolerance. Industry charged that the 2 ppm level would result in a whopping 75% reduction in fish sales. However, while the fishermen supported the 5 ppm level, environmental interests were arguing that PCB is too dangerous at any level; they supported the 2 ppm level, and urged an ultimate goal of zero concentration.

In lowering the tolerances, FDA stated that new evidence indicates that PCBs are "more toxic than previously thought," noting that PCBs are now thought to cause reproductive problems. That statement was particularly disturbing to the Environmental Defense Fund which has charged that FDA was stalling in its efforts to lower the PCB levels. EDF recently sued FDA in an attempt to speed up its final decision on PCB levels. The Fund noted in a statement following the FDA action that there was plenty of evidence in 1975 indicating adverse effects of PCB exposure and that the agency should have acted at least two years ago.

FDA has dropped the tolerance for PCB levels in poultry from 5 ppm to 3 ppm (on a fat basis). PCB tolerance for milk and dairy products will be reduced from 2.5 ppm to 1.5 ppm (fat basis) and in eggs from 0.5 ppm to 0.3 ppm.

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