7/12/78 FYI: G. F. Barton
L. A. Miller
E. T. Mollice
R. A. Stohr
J. C. Weber
[redacted]

FROM: R. C. Isham

file PCB Puerto Rico

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Costly Chicken Feed

Contamination of Fish Meal With PCBs Sparks FDA Study of Mishap at a Ralston Purina Plant

By Rich Jaroslovsky
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON—More than a year after firemen put out a blaze at a Puerto Rico animal-feed warehouse, the incident is still generating heat.

The fire broke out in April 1977, at a Ponce, Puerto Rico, facility leased and run by a unit of Ralston Purina Co. It was soon extinguished, and nobody was hurt.

But because of that fire, the federal government disclosed in April of this year that hundreds of thousands of chickens and millions of eggs in the U.S. had to be destroyed. The reason: The chickens had eaten fish meal from the warehouse that had been contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls, highly toxic substances known as PCBs.

The Food and Drug Administration is investigating the contamination to see whether criminal charges should be brought against Ralston Purina or any of its subsidiaries. But even more important, government investigators want to know how the contamination happened and why it took nearly a year to come to light.

Series of Troubles

What they have found so far is a combination of apparent mistakes by Ralston compounded by the difficulty of detecting the contamination until it was too late. "We're still trying to make sure, but it seems like there are a lot of severe violations involved," one FDA official says. Edmund Fry, another agency investigator, adds: "This is one of those things where everything that could have gone wrong went wrong."

Although at least some tainted chickens and eggs were eaten by people, the FDA says, apparently nobody ate enough to suffer any immediate harm. Nonetheless, the agency says it is extremely concerned. "Any time you contaminate food, you've got a serious problem," says Frank Cordle, an FDA scientist.

And investigators are especially troubled by the involvement of PCBs, fluids that have been widely used as insulators in electrical transformers and other equipment. In recent years, scientists have become increasingly worried about rising PCB levels in the environment and about their long-term impact on human health. "There's an enormous amount of PCBs around, in the air, water and some foods," Mr. Cordle says.

When humans ingest PCBs, the substance isn't broken up by the body. Instead, it is stored in the fat tissue, where concentrations can build up. While all the evidence isn't in PCBs can cause severe skin and eye irritations, and perhaps cancer and reproductive disorders as well. "We worry about long-term exposure to these things, even in low levels," Mr. Cordle says.

Ban Being Introduced

As a result, the government had already taken steps to curb the use of PCBs before the incident in Puerto Rico. The Environmental Protection Agency, under orders from Congress, is phasing in a ban on all manufacture or sale of PCBs. And the FDA has imposed rules aimed at keeping existing PCB-using equipment away from all foods for humans and for animals.

It is those food standards that FDA investigators think may have been violated in the Ralston case. They say two PCB-containing electrical transformers were apparently being kept in the same warehouse as the 800,000 pounds of fish meal when the fire broke out.

When the blaze was extinguished, FDA investigators say, the stored fish meal was soaked with water from the fire hoses—and also, apparently, with PCB fluid that leaked from the fire-damaged electrical equipment. But instead of destroying the meal, the agency says, National Packing Co., the Ralston unit that leased the warehouse, dried the stuff out, reprocessed it and shipped it to the mainland U.S.

One crucial question the FDA is trying to answer is whether anyone from National Packing or Ralston knew—or should have known—that the meal could have been tainted. Investigators note that PCB contamination can be hard to find unless it is specifically sought in scientific tests. In any event, the agency says, contamination tests that might have disclosed the PCB problem apparently weren't conducted.

The answers to such questions could determine whether the government brings criminal charges. FDA field investigators have recommended that the agency hold an "informal hearing" on the matter with company officials—the first step toward possible prosecution. If the agency holds such a hearing and finds grounds for action, it can then ask the Justice Department to bring criminal charges.

(Ralston won't say how or why the material was allowed to be shipped and won't comment on several other aspects of the case. The company "doesn't want to get into a long discussion of this matter," a spokesman says. He notes that Ralston is negotiating for settlements with customers who bought the tainted meal.)

Much Feed Recalled

Ralston itself used some of the contaminated meal as an ingredient in some of its dry cat foods, which it has since recalled. But much of the 800,000 pounds was sold to other companies, which used the meal to make their own animal feeds. The FDA says more than 2½ million pounds of feed containing the tainted meal has been recalled.

The PCB contamination apparently went undetected until late last year. Then, Country Pride Foods, an El Dorado, Ark., poultry grower, began to notice problems. Though Country Pride won't disclose just what it found, others close to the situation say the company began discovering unduly high chemical levels in tissue taken from its chickens.

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So Country Pride contacted H. J. Baker & Bro. Inc., a New York-based feed manufacturer that makes a high-protein concentrate that Country Pride feeds to its chickens.

"They found a problem but at first didn't know where it was," recalls Vincent Winsch, a Baker vice president. Baker officials also couldn't pinpoint the problem, Mr. Winsch says, "so what we did was to turn the house upside down." The company spent a hectic New Year's weekend shipping out samples of its products to a testing lab trying to identify the problem.

Agencies Notified

Early last January, Mr. Winsch says, Baker found evidence implicating fish meal that it had bought from Ralston. Baker then notified the FDA and the Agriculture Department of its suspicions. It also informed Ralston, which, Mr. Winsch says, "jumped in with both feet just as quick as they could" to confirm the findings and begin telling customers not to use the meal.

There is some dispute over just what or when Ralston told the FDA about the problem. Most companies routinely inform the agency when they discover a major contamination and begin product recalls, although they aren't legally bound to. In this case, though, the FDA says it went to Ralston after hearing from Baker. Ralston has previously said it went to the FDA, but the company won't comment further on the matter.

Whatever happened, Ralson began telling its customers about the contamination early this year and started recalling all unused quantities of the contaminated meal. By that time, though, much of the meal had already been used. The FDA figures that about 400,000 chickens that ate the tainted meal had to be destroyed, and that some 15,000 dozen eggs a day were withheld from market because of contamination.

The FDA says that recalls of some PCB-contaminated feeds are being conducted even now, but that most such products are off the market. Not all the products being recalled actually contain the tainted fish meal, the FDA says; some of them got contaminated because they were handled by the same machinery that processed the PCB-tainted meal. "Once it gets out, it seems to get everywhere," the agency's Mr. Fry says.

Material Being Destroyed

The PCB-laden material is currently being destroyed under government supervision. "Some meal was so bad it couldn't even be dumped in a sanitary landfill," Mr. Fry says. Instead, the remnants are being disposed of in special hazardous-waste areas.

No one really knows just how much the PCB incident will end up costing, in either economic or environmental terms. Ralston, currently negotiating compensation for customers who used the tainted meal, doesn't know or won't say what the final price tag is likely to be.

And it may take years for scientists to assess the full impact on the environment and on people. "The toxicity of PCBs is really still a gray area," Mr. Cordle, the FDA scientist says, and more study is needed to gauge its effects on human health and on the ecological food chain. Nonetheless, enough is already known to cause alarm about the Ralston spill. Mr. Fry, the agency investigator, declares: "This was really a disastrous event."

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