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Permissible Levels in Food of Toxic PCBs Are Being Sharply Lowered by the FDA

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON—The Food and Drug Administration sharply lowered the permissible levels for highly toxic polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, in food.

The new limits affect fish, poultry and dairy products shipped in interstate commerce after Aug. 28, a spokesman said. The agency originally set PCB levels for such foods in 1973. But, "new evidence indicates that these chemicals are more toxic than previously thought," the spokesman explained.

The FDA most drastically reduced allowable PCB levels in fish and shellfish, lowering them to two parts per million from five parts per million. The spokesman said PCBs seem to be most concentrated in fresh-water fish, such as coho and chinook salmon from the Great Lakes, fresh-water trout and catfish. The lower levels could result in the loss of about $8 million of commercial fish a year, the FDA estimated.

In addition, FDA Commissioner Donald Kennedy sent letters to governors of 11 states urging them to take additional action to protect residents against PCB-contaminated fish. Many fish caught by commercial and sport fishermen don't enter interstate commerce, and so aren't affected by FDA regulations. Mr. Kennedy's letter suggested that women of childbearing age be especially cautioned about consuming large amounts of PCB-contaminated fish.

The letters were sent to the governors of: Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

The FDA said other new PCB levels are: 1.5 parts per million for milk and dairy products, down from 2.5 parts per million; three parts per million for poultry products, down from five parts per million; and 0.3 part per million for eggs, down from 0.5 part per million.

PCBs have been widely used as insulators in electrical transformers and other equipment. Manufacturers used to dump PCBs into waterways and some got into the soil. In recent years, scientists have worried about people eating food containing the substance because of evidence that PCBs may cause cancer and reproductive disorders.

In a related development, an Environmental Protection Agency spokeswoman said that, effective Sunday, it will ban all sale or manufacture of PCBs. The agency has been phasing in the ban since last year, under orders from Congress.

She added that "most uses of PCBs" also will be banned. However, electrical transformers with PCBs as insulators may "be serviced for the lifetime of the equipment, probably about 30 to 40 years," she said.