

Agencies request food, feed be checked for PCB problems

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Three federal agencies Tuesday asked food manufacturers and related industries to take voluntary steps to help prevent accidental contamination of food with the chemical PCB.

The agencies requested that food, animal feed, fertilizer and pesticide companies check their plants immediately for electrical equipment containing PCBs and remove the equipment when special EPA-approved incinerators are available to dispose of the chemical.

The agencies are asking the companies to take these initial actions voluntarily to protect the public until regulations, now under consideration, can be issued that may require replacement of PCB-containing equipment.

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are a class of chemicals often used as insulating fluids in electrical equipment. Studies on laboratory animals have shown that PCBs can cause tumors, reproductive failure, stomach and skin disorders and other health problems.

The agencies that made today's request are: the Environmental Protection Agency, which regulates PCB production and use under the Toxic Substances Control Act; the Food Safety and Quality Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which regulates meat, poultry, and egg products; and the Food and Drug Administration, which regulates all other food.

The agencies' request was the result of a recent incident in the northwestern U.S. in which PCBs from a transformer stored at a Montana meat packing plant accidentally contaminated animal feed ingredients being made there.

As a result, PCBs entered the food supply and contaminated animal feed as well as chickens, turkeys and hogs, which ate the feed, and food products made from these animals. No injuries were reported from

people who consumed contaminated products, but large amounts of food had to be destroyed.

"Because of this incident, we are extremely concerned over the continued use of equipment containing PCBs in such establishments," EPA Administrator Douglas M. Costle said. "We want to do all that we can to prevent accidents like this from recurring."

Jere E. Goyan, Commissioner of Food and Drugs, said; "Because of their use over many years, PCBs have become a widespread contaminant in our environment. We cannot continue to take unnecessary risks with this dangerous chemical. PCB's have no place in food production or related facilities."

"We are confident that the companies will take necessary steps to remove equipment containing PCBs as quickly as possible," Goyan said.

Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Carol Tucker Foreman said, "The most effective way to control the hazards of contaminated food is to remove, as much as possible, the source of the contamination. Here is a clear opportunity to help stop future incidents of PCB contamination before they start."

FDA in 1973 restricted the use of PCBs in processing facilities for food, animal feed and food packaging materials to totally enclosed electrical equipment.

Similarly, EPA banned production and some uses of PCBs in 1979 but the ban did not apply to the use of the chemical in totally enclosed electrical equipment already manufactured at the time.

Because PCBs are so dangerous, they must be disposed of under tightly controlled conditions. Suitable incinerators are now under evaluation by EPA for possible approval late this spring.

The request to the companies and list of contacts for information on the availability of incinerators is

in the form of a booklet, "Polychlorinated Biphenyls: An Alert for Food and Feed Facilities." Copies are available from the EPA Industry Assistance Office at (toll free) 800/424-9065 or, in Washington, D.C. at 202/554-1404, or by writing to John B. Ritch Jr., Director, Office of Industry Assistance, Office of Toxic Substances, Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, D.C. 20460.

Copies are also available by writing to: Nathaniel Geary, Director, Intergovernmental and Industry Affairs Staff, Office of Regulatory Affairs, Food and Drug Administration, Rockville, Maryland 20857, (Phone: 301/443-1583).

Copies also may be obtained from Maxine Grant, USDA-FSQS Information, Room 36125, Washington, D.C. 20250, 202/447-5223.

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