Swifter Action Sought on Food Contamination

Auditors point to last summer's PCB incident as the latest example of regulatory inefficiency

Although state and federal regulators seemed to act vigorously last summer in response to the contamination of food throughout the Western states by polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's), it is apparent in retrospect that their efforts were characterized by ineptness and confusion in the period just before the public learned about the disaster.

As in several previous incidents of food contamination, an elaborate system of safeguards did not prevent wide distribution and partial consumption of the PCB-tainted food. The event was reminiscent of the 1973 contamination of food and feedstuff by polybrominated biphenyls (PBB's) in Michigan, and the kepone contamination of the James River in 1975, when contaminants were not spotted until exposure was widespread.

Critics in Congress have recently called upon the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to respond more effectively to what is seen as the growing threat of environmental contamination of food. In particular, Congress wants the regulators to treat a crisis as a crisis—to respond swiftly and not routinely in a PCB-type accident.

According to a House oversight subcommittee, the PCB incident began innocently. A power transformer stored in a shed at the Pierce Packing Company in Billings, Montana, leaked its PCB coolant into the slaughterhouse's internal sewage system for animal wastes. The wastes were collected, rendered, and added to animal feed that was then sold throughout at least nine states. According to a company official, neither the coolant's manufacturer nor a transformer consultant had informed the company that PCB's were in use at the packing plant.

State and federal regulators learned of the contamination after a series of events that were embarrassingly routine. A telltale sample from a poultry plant in Provo, Utah, lay in a freezer for 7 days while an inspection official went on vacation; an additional 5 days elapsed before testing commenced. Testing required 10 days, and when positive results were shown it took 5 days to notify regional authorities of the USDA, and additional weeks to notify state health officials and the FDA. The public was not alerted until 2 months after the sample had been collected and untold months after the contamination had begun.

Even now, authorities are uncertain how much potentially hazardous food was consumed; eggs, poultry, cakes, and mayonnaise were all destroyed. Carol Tucker Foreman, as assistant secretary of agriculture who was called upon to explain her department's mistakes, told a congressional subcommittee that the discovery itself was "very much a matter of chance." It is possible, she said, that under the current surveillance system for environmental contaminants in food, "a single incident of this size could go entirely undetected."

Recent audits of the FDA and USDA efforts place the blame at the feet of the agencies themselves. A study by the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), for example, suggests that regulators have mishandled the identification of well-known possible contaminants, such as pesticides and trace metals, and overlooked the potential hazards of a host of lesser-known contaminants, such as toxic organic chemicals. OTA counted at least 243 cases of contamination since 1968, the most expensive being the 1973 PBB poisonings in Michigan, which cost at least $215 million.

Criticisms in the OTA report are but echoes of earlier complaints filed by the General Accounting Office and the House subcommittee on oversight and investigations. The subcommittee, which has held hearings on the topic under two different chairmen, has rapped the FDA for conducting too limited a surveillance program, and for not properly enforcing existing limits on contamination levels.

Despite the evidence that these complaints are justified, there is reason to believe that environmental contamination of food does not pose an imminent threat to public health. Thus far, at least, this country has not experienced mass poisonings as serious as those that have occurred in Japan and less developed nations from pesticides, PCB's, and trace metals. The Center for Disease Control reported recently it had discovered no acute illnesses directly related to the PCB incident in Montana. And tests reveal more generally that most Americans carry in their tissues the residues of 94 different chemical contaminants without obvious deleterious effect.

But the FDA itself feels chastened by the Montana circumstances and the outside criticism. In an internal report released just after the PCB case came to light, it proposes to overhaul its system for deciding which chemicals to look for in food; to increase its overall surveillance efforts; to conduct more research on inexpensive, fast methods of identifying contaminants; and to increase its coordination and cooperation with other agencies. The FDA proposes to do all this by reallocating some funds internally and by applying for more appropriations from Congress.

There have also been suggestions that a single federal agency be designated as the lead in a contamination crisis. Fred Pierce, chairman of the board of the Pierce Packing Company, says that once the incident became public, he and his attorneys had to meet and cooperate with officials of USDA, FDA, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the Center for Disease Control, three state agencies, and "USDOL/DAO [which] was signed in on the register, but for the life of us we are unable to recall what the agency was." Pierce says that one experience like that is enough for any man's lifetime, and that he is thinking about buying his own contamination monitoring equipment, so the affair does not repeat itself. Sanford Miller, associate commissioner of foods at the FDA, thinks the idea of a lead agency is a fine one, and suggests that FDA would fill that spot.

Another suggestion is that FDA establish a pilot program to look for unanticipated chemicals in the food supply. Representative Bob Eckhardt (D-Texas), chairman of the House oversight committee, says that "little effort is being made to detect and identify substances for which no action levels or tolerances exist." The major obstacle to an increased effort is cost: each state or regional laboratory equipped to look for unanticipated chemicals in food samples would cost $2 million, and the process by which chemical contaminants are identified costs more than $10,000 per chemical.—R. JEFFREY SMITH

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