

Elevated dioxin levels found in B.C. milk

Linked to pressure-treated wood

Adrienne Tanner, Vancouver Sun

Published: Saturday, February 10, 2007

Elevated dioxin levels found in milk at two Fraser Valley dairy farms have prompted a province-wide order to change how feed is stored in farms with bins made of pressure-treated wood.

The B.C. Milk Producers Association sent registered letters this week to every dairy farmer in British Columbia demanding that farmers report all feed storage bunkers made from lumber treated with wood preservatives such as pentachlorophenols.

In large quantities, pentachlorophenols and other dioxins have been linked to health problems in humans, including cancer and birth defects.



Elevated dioxin levels found in milk at two Fraser Valley dairy farms have prompted a province-wide order to change how feed is stored in farms with bins made of pressure-treated wood.

Getty File Photo

Farms with chemically-treated wood bunkers in use are being ordered to line them with untreated plywood and a layer of plastic to prevent future chemical leaching, said Robin Smith, executive director for the milk producers association.

"As they empty out the silo, and before another crop comes in, they must make the changes. We don't want contaminants of any kind."

The order was made after the National Chemical Residue Monitoring Program picked up higher than usual levels of dioxin in milk collected in 2005 at two Fraser Valley dairy farms, said Mervyn Wetzstein, B.C.'s manager of livestock health management and regulation.

Milk collected at that time was not immediately tested, but once the results were known, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and provincial government officials were alerted, he said.

The elevated level at the first Fraser Valley farm was small at just over eight parts per trillion (ppt), said Paul Mayers, a spokesman for CFIA. But it was significantly higher than the normal "background" dioxin levels of 3.5 ppt against which the tests are measured.

Then a second farm, also in the Fraser Valley, was found to have slightly elevated dioxin levels of 4 ppt.

By the time the results were revealed in the spring of 2006, the problem milk had been mixed with milk from many other farms and sold.

At no time was there a risk to the public buying milk at the supermarket, said Dr. Perry Kendall, B.C.'s provincial health officer.

"There was a major dilution factor," said Kendall. Milk from those farms would have made up "less than half a per cent of all the milk produced in the region."

However, farmers running the dairy, who drank fresh cow's milk every day, were advised to stop, Kendall said.

The dioxin levels were deemed high enough to warrant an investigation to find the contamination source and take all necessary steps to remove it, Mayers said.

"Dioxins are considered a toxic chemical and they can cause health effects at high enough levels," he said. "There is a recognition that milk can be a source of exposure."

Scientists and provincial food safety specialists followed the milk sample trail to the farms and began searching for likely contamination sources in the spring of 2006, Wetzstein said.

"We visited the farms and sampled various groups of cows. We identified treated wood structures that were a problem," he said.

Tests were also done at neighbouring farms to rule out possible environmental sources for the contamination.