Task force devising model law for safe storage of chemicals

Fire departments in five Santa Clara County cities are devising a model ordinance on storage of chemicals after recent tank leaks at local electronics firms.

The task force, which includes personnel from Santa Clara, San Jose, Sunnyvale, Mountain View and Palo Alto departments, plans to finish drafting the ordinance by May 8, according to Santa Clara fire Chief Don Visconti.

Visconti said the ordinance, which will be designed so it can be adopted by all cities in the county, will address prevention and early detection of hazardous materials leaks and spills.

Visconti said both above- and below-ground storage systems would be regulated by the ordinance.

He said the ordinance may require that underground tanks be stored in a cement vault equipped with a detection devise that would warn of leaks.

Visconti believes a new inspection system for underground tanks is critical.

"Some of these companies have been around here for years and their tanks are old," Visconti said.

Robert Campbell, a Santa Clara fire department chemical hazard specialist, said the new regulations won't come a minute too soon.

"In the past, underground tanks of waste materials have not been addressed by anybody. They (fire departments) trusted the company to do it right. It could be under the ground for 30 years and no one would go back to inspect it," Campbell said.

Campbell said the "model" ordinance probably will require regular inspections of the tanks.

He said major firms such as Fairchild, National Semiconductor, Intel and Hewlett Packard already have decided to put their underground tanks inside vaults.

Campbell said the "model" ordinance probably will not require that the firms replace their old, non-leaking tanks with new ones. Companies that have the old tanks may be required to drill test wells so water can be drawn from the nearby water supply and tested for chemical content.

The wells, which now cost about $3,000 each, would be paid for by the companies, Campbell said.

Campbell said the fire code now does not adequately cover chemicals. Permits, for example, are required only for underground storage of flammable liquids. Some of the chemicals are not flammable. So, the company does not have to get a permit and the fire department does not inspect the tank.