

Leaking Chemicals in California's 'Silicon Valley' Alarm Neighbors

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SAN JOSE, Calif., May 16 — Not long ago Lorraine Ross learned of what she calls "a chemical bomb" in the water coming out of the faucets in her neighborhood.

Not everyone agrees with Mrs. Ross's characterization. But local officials concur to the extent that they are now making a major investigation of underground water pollution caused by leaks of hazardous chemicals used in the computer industry in this area.

The cleanup effort was touched off by Mrs. Ross after she read a newspaper report that the drinking water in the neighborhood of Los Paseos was contaminated by a hazardous solvent from the underground storage tanks of a major silicon chip manufacturer, the Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corporation.

Mrs. Ross presented city officials with statistics she had gathered that appeared to show a high incidence of recent birth defects and miscarriages in her neighborhood. Her year-old daughter, Juliana, in fact, was born with a congenital heart defect.

Similar Leaks Disclosed

The investigation has led to the disclosure of similar leaks at computer companies in this area, known as Silicon Valley. Fifteen cities and the industry are now working to develop rules for determining whether leaks are endangering drinking water and for preventing them from seeping into wells and aquifers.

The industry's trade group, the Semiconductor Industry Association, and state health officials say the scope of the situation is still unknown.

Last Thursday, Fairchild released a study it had commissioned suggesting that leaks from its tank could not have

caused birth defects. However, the company has acknowledged the seepage of industrial chemicals.

"We did not think these tanks would leak," said John Salazar, a spokesman for Fairchild. "They were certified not to leak. They were required to be underground because they were thought to be a fire safety hazard, but meeting one safety standard caused us to have another problem in another area."

Two weeks ago a group of residents filed suit against Fairchild and an array of local and state agencies accusing them of negligence.

Dispute Over Data on Defects

Santa Clara County says its statistics do not reflect an abnormally high number of birth defects and miscarriages in Los Paseos. The rate of birth defects in the county last year was 6.4 per 1,000. The residents who are suing maintain that the rate in Los Paseos was 15.2 per 1,000 in Los Paseos and 32 per 1,000 in an adjacent census tract using the same water.

County records do not track miscarriages, and residents question the accuracy of its other data.

The Fairchild leak was the first known case in the San Francisco area, and possibly in the state, of water contamination from underground storage or disposal of hazardous chemicals, according to Harold Singer, an official of the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board. He said the agency was investigating 16 such incidents in a nine-county area.

"This whole problem is unusual to us," Mr. Singer said.

The horizon above San Jose is unmarred by smokestacks, and people here are proud of that. They have worked hard at making the valley a base of the computer-electronics industry and an unpolluted place to live.

The possibility of a threat to the unborn has surprised and even shaken residents, who say they were not aware that stored chemicals could be endangering public wells, which number in the hundreds and are a major source of drinking water here.

"When I first became Mayor and we embarked on an economic development program, there was no doubt in my mind that this was a clean industry," said Mayor Janet Hayes of San Jose. "We now know we are definitely in the

Conviction Is Upheld Despite Nap by Judge

AUSTIN, Tex., May 19 (AP) — The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals refused today to overturn a jury conviction even though the trial judge fell asleep on the bench.

On Dec. 13, 1978, State District Judge J. E. Winters, fresh from the Dallas Bar Association's Christmas lunch, had warned jurors that he might doze. He told them:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have just been to dinner and I believe I've eaten more than I have eaten in my life and if I go to sleep up here, you whistle at me. Will you?"

The trial ended with the conviction of Joseph Jackson, who was sentenced to one year in jail for resisting arrest in a scuffle with a policeman.

Mr. Jackson's appeal said the trial was unfair because Judge Winters fell asleep. But the appeals court affirmed the conviction, saying it was clear that the judge did sleep, but adding that there was no proof as to when his nap began.

midst of a chemical revolution."

Fairchild has identified the chemicals in its tank as 1,1,1-trichloroethane, xylene, isopropanol and acetone. It said that only the trichloroethane, a cleaning and degreasing solvent, was found in the tainted well.

The effects of low levels of trichloroethane are a matter of controversy, and a 1975 study by the Dow Chemical Company found no evidence that it caused birth defects in rats, but Ted Daigle, who is leading San Jose's part of the cleanup effort, said it could be fatal when inhaled in high concentrations.

In recent weeks, high levels of another toxic solvent, trichloroethylene, which is suspected of causing cancer, were reported in the ground water near a Fairchild plant and at a former Intel Corporation plant in Mountain View and at a Hewlett-Packard Company plant in Palo Alto.

Mrs. Ross said the biggest obstacle had been getting the officials to believe anything might be amiss. She and her neighbors remain skeptical about the diligence of officials in investigating an industry that is vital to the state's economy.

"The burden is on us to prove the chemicals could hurt us, when we should be able to assume that our water is pure and our air is pure," she said.

The state water quality board has sent out questionnaires to 1,400 companies asking them what chemicals they have stored, where and for how long.

Tom Hinkelman, executive director of the Semiconductor Industry Association, said the group had given the state a list of 12 chemicals to test for. The state expanded the list to 149.

"Whatever the local people have asked for we have tried to supply," Mr. Hinkelman said. "For God's sake, we drink the water, too."



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Lorraine Ross with her year-old daughter, Juliana, at a meeting with neighbors in her home in San Jose, Calif., about water pollution from chemical leaks in the neighborhood. Juliana was born with a heart defect.

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