

State orders tests of underground chemical tanks

By Susan Yoachim
Staff Writer

In an unprecedented attempt to regulate underground chemical storage tanks, the state will require hundreds of silicon-chip manufacturers and other toxic-chemical users to test for leaks of hazardous wastes.

The leak-detection tests, which will require soil excavation, will be performed by as many as 1,400 companies in Santa Clara County, southern Alameda County and the Livermore Valley.

The staff of the state Regional Water Quality Control Board is ordering the tests because of the contamination of ground water by leaks from several underground chemical-storage facilities.

Joint meetings

Tom Hinkelman, executive director of the Semiconductor Industry Association, said that a dozen industry experts on chemistry and the environment have been meeting with water board staff to fashion a cleanup and monitoring effort.

"Hopefully, the solution that we come up with will be one that is seen as practical, economical and beneficial socially," Hinkelman said. "It's the right thing to do. It's (also) the economical thing."

Since January, seven of the largest semiconductor manufacturers in the Santa Clara Valley have reported underground-water basin contamination as the result of leaks from their underground chemical storage tanks or pits. The companies use toxic and hazardous chemicals to clean and to impart electrical properties to the silicon chips that are used in many electronic devices, including calculators and digital watches.

Wells shut down

One public well and several private wells have been closed because of hazardous chemical contamination.

"We now have a history," said Harold Singer, toxics-division chief for the San Francisco Bay Region of the state water-quality control board. "We can now say to them: 'You now have a facility that's a threatened discharger,' on the basis of what's happened elsewhere."

Since neither state nor local authorities know how many underground storage facilities there are, Singer said the water board sent questionnaires late last month to about 1,400 companies to determine the number and location of the underground tanks and pits.

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— Industry spokesman

State and local authorities have admitted that a gap has existed in the regulation of underground storage tanks.

Since the chemicals usually are stored in the tanks for less than 60 days, they do not fall under the hazardous-waste regulations of the state Department of Health Services.

Local fire departments ordered the tanks placed underground because they posed a significant threat of fire or explosion.

No specific rules

Regional branches of the State Water Resources Control Board are empowered to safeguard the quality of underground water but had no specific rules to cover the buried tanks.

However, when the tanks become a water-pollution threat, state water quality laws provide regulatory authority.

Once a formal order has been issued to stop polluting, violators are subject to fines of \$10,000 a day under the Porter-Cologne Water Quality Act of 1960.

Singer said state water authorities also can require the companies to test for underground chemical leaks under the state water statutes.

The water board chose the 1,400 or so companies based on their proximity to municipal underground water sources. In many parts of Santa Clara County, residents depend heavily on well water for drinking, cooking and bathing.

Companies must return the questionnaires by May 31. Singer said the first tests will be done on companies with the oldest underground chemical storage facilities. The test results must be reported to the water board by Aug. 31.

The incentive for industry to comply "is very clear," Singer said. "In the short term, you save money by dumping into the

Continued on Page 2B

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