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Activists seek cleanup of 120 toxic spills in county

By Julie Appleby
Dispatch Staff Writer

South County may soon face the same water pollution problems as its northern neighbors unless tight industry controls are enforced, local activists warned today.

Tuesday, a San Jose-based citizen's group called for immediate help from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to clean up toxic spills in an estimated 120 sites in Santa Clara County. The group was responding to a Little Hoover Commission report citing "years of

failure" in the statewide battle to clean up targeted sites.

Gilroy resident Lorraine Ross, member of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, said the group's opinion is that local agencies, such as the health department and the Regional Water Quality Control Board, are not staffed adequately — and can't protect the public.

The group also asked Gov. George Deukmejian to replace \$5 million into the state budget for toxic monitoring, an item he vetoed.

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Lorraine Ross

...governor just cut the money

Water

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"It's hard to believe that California is going to clean up the problem considering the governor just cut the money that was going to clean it up," Ross said. "Unfortunately, unless someone like the EPA jumps in and cleans it up, we will have a lot of polluted water in the valley.

So far, however, the group has not asked for help in South County because the major problems are further north. A March, 1983, list of toxic leaks or spills drawn up by the group shows eight sites in south San Jose and South County — mostly gas stations.

The closest listed industrial site is at the United Technologies Plant above Coyote, where a company spokesman said today that there is no imminent danger. The reason the plant is on the list is because of traces of solvent found underneath the plant sometime before 1979, said Malcolm Gil, personnel manager.

Further tests show the solvent to be confined to the company's property and not traveling, Gil said. Ross said she had not heard of a spill at the site, citing the Fairchild spill as the closest one to South County.

Ross lived near the Fairchild site at the time of the spill and is participating in a yet-to-be-tried lawsuit seeking damage payments from the company to local residents. Ross' daughter was born with a congenital heart defect requiring two operations that she traces to the chemical spill.

With industry marching its way down the valley, Ross urged Gilroy and Morgan Hill to not rush into approving sites, but instead carefully analyze where the

industrial parks will be located.

"They think it's the magic answer for the tax base, but if they have to pay for problems industry causes, I don't think they would be as enamored," Ross said. "I'm not opposed to industry, but I don't think we should be too anxious for it to move down here."

Once it arrives, however, industry should be concentrated near the freeway to keep trucks carrying chemicals from driving through town. Cities should also maintain greenbelts around sites to protect air quality and closely monitored the industries, Ross said.

Ross and Gilroy Action Group member Carol Marques share similar opinions on where industry should be located. Both opposed approval of the Santa Teresa Technology Park, while approving of Las Animas, although they are concerned about the high water table in that area.

They agree if the cities actively enforce their hazardous waste laws, the potential for problems will be minimized.

"The hazardous waste ordinance is only as good as those who do the investigation," Marques said. "If they take all the necessary precautions, we will be safe. But if people are bought off, if they don't monitor monthly, then we will be in just as big a mess as the Fairchild neighborhood."

Both women, however, are skeptical of official pronouncements on water safety.

"I don't know how much of what they're telling us is the truth," Marques said. "Because they don't want to alarm people,

have they turned their backs and said it's not a problem?"

"I'd like to say our water quality is good because people are looking out for us, but I'm concerned about that," Marques said.

The head of Ross' group, Ted Smith, plans to meet with EPA chief William Ruckelshaus Monday in Washington to give him a list of 10 "demands."

Ross said the EPA has already agreed to three items on the list: to sue industry to recover the cost of cleaning up spills, to meet with leaders who are pursuing the public's right to know what chemicals are used at specific sites and to recognize the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health as an official representative of the area.

The other demands are: to clean up the 120 sites in Santa Clara County, to relocate residents who are affected, to provide medical screening to workers and residents, to prosecute executives of companies known to be covering up spill information, to provide medical care for victims and to test air and tap water quality at the sites.

Meanwhile, Sacramento legislators Tuesday turned down a compromise proposal to issue \$100 million in bonds to begin an immediate cleanup of toxic waste sites. Opponents of the bill said industries, not taxpayers, should bear the costs of cleanup.

Another bill, this one to allow large industries to write and monitor their own water quality protection plans won approval Tuesday from the Assembly Committee on Consumer Protection and Toxic Materials.