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## Birth Defect Study Shows Link to Area of Toxic Spill

By PAUL JACOBS, Times Staff Writer

SAN JOSE—State health officials Wednesday announced the results of a three-year study that shows a high rate of birth defects and miscarriages in a Silicon Valley community where a chemical spill led to a heavy contamination of water supplies.

The investigation was launched in 1982, shortly after parents learned of the chemical leak at a high-tech company and began comparing notes on their pregnancies.

The state study, which required 10,000 hours of investigation and the labors of 19 investigators, confirms with hard numbers what the concerned families had discovered themselves: The incidence of serious heart abnormalities, miscarriages and other birth defects was two to three times as high in the San Jose neighborhood of Los Paseos as in a nearby community

where there was no spill or in Santa Clara County as a whole.

In revealing the results of the investigation, the public health officials pointed out that their research does not necessarily show that the toxics spill in question, at the Fairchild Camera and Instrument Co., was the cause of the problem pregnancies.

Instead, Dr. Kenneth W. Kizer, the state's chief of public health programs, emphasized: "At this time contamination of the water cannot be ruled out as a cause."

More than a dozen high-tech companies are scattered in the area served by the water district. And at least one other, an IBM plant, has documented a leak of similar toxic chemicals.

State scientists are convinced that the high incidence of birth defects and miscarriages are un-

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likely to be explained by chance alone, according to Dr. John Harris, director of the state's birth defects monitoring program. The odds against the problems clustering in one community by coincidence are about 40,000 to 1, he indicated.

And when Gov. George Deukmejian was briefed on the findings a month ago, he was alarmed enough to add \$825,000 to his proposed state budget for further studies of the Great Oaks Water District where the spill took place and of the rest of the county, which has a high concentration of firms using large quantities of solvents in manufacturing electronics equipment. Health officials said that the results also helped convince Deukmejian to include \$4 million in the budget to set limits on drinking water contamination for more than 50 common chemicals.

Despite the reluctance of health authorities to blame the Fairchild spill for the increase in birth defects and miscarriages, community residents said the findings vindicate their concerns. John Tyndall, an attorney representing more than 400 residents of the water district in a suit over the spill, said that the evidence supports his clients' claim that the contamina-

tion caused problems in pregnancy.

"I'm happy with the results," said Susan Puppo, whose 4-year-old son Brian was born with two holes through the central dividing wall of his heart. The youngster has already had four operations to help correct the problem and must be regularly checked by heart specialists because of continuing problems with irregular heart beats, his mother said.

The Fairchild spill is one of a small, but growing number of incidents where water pollution is suspected of causing serious health problems.

In Woburn, Mass., a group of Harvard University scientists found a high incidence of leukemia in a community plagued by water contamination. Australian scientists have reported a link between chemical pollutants in drinking water and children born with open spines.

But the California scientists contend that the newest study is perhaps the most rigorous investigation of the possible health effects of a chemical spill ever conducted.

The Los Paseos study began shortly after company officials at Fairchild discovered that as much as 50,000 gallons of chemicals had leaked from an underground stor-

age tank.

Concentrations of two widely used solvents, trichloroethane and dichloroethylene, were found in nearby wells in concentrations as much as 800 times the levels permitted in drinking water.

The wells were soon closed. And it is uncertain just how long and at what levels tap water was affected.

In their study, the scientists pointed out that many of the cases of birth defects occurred far from the contaminated wells—a finding that raises questions over whether the spill at Fairchild was, in fact, responsible.

But mothers in the Los Paseos area near the Fairchild plant had a miscarriage rate of more than 20%, twice the rate in a comparison community four miles away. Similarly, the rate of malformations at birth was close to 7%, more than three times the rate in the other community.

Most perplexing of all were the findings that children born in 1981 to mothers living in the water district were almost three times as likely to be born with serious heart defects.

After closure of the contaminated wells, Kizer said, water in the area is now free of pollutants.