

Bay Area officials blast EPA 'disarray' over Silicon Valley water

By John Flinn
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SAN JOSE — The government is "steaming around in circles" as it attempts the crucial task of cleaning up ground-water pollution in Silicon Valley, a sharply critical Rep. Norman Mineta said here yesterday.

"Efforts to solve this problem are in disarray," the San Jose Democrat complained before a congressional committee hearing here. "We are literally losing ground to the problem rather than closing in on a solution."

There are numerous sites in Santa Clara County that have toxic contamination of underground water supplies, most of them caused by leaking solvent tanks at high-technology plants.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency has placed 19 of the sites on its Superfund cleanup list, but Mineta criticized EPA for han-



Norman Mineta

'More Superfund sites than any other county in the nation'

dling the sites separately instead of as one problem.

"This valley is supposed to be the model for the economic future of the nation, and yet we have more Superfund sites than any other county in the nation," Mineta said during a San Jose hearing of the oversight subcommittee of the House Committee on Public Works and Transportation.

Rep. Don Edwards, D-San Jose, also criticized the lack of swift government action in cleaning up Santa Clara County's polluted ground-water.

"The EPA has done little in Sil-

icon Valley except propose sites for the Superfund list," he said.

Added Rep. Clay Shaw, R-Florida: "It seems like everyone's standing around pointing fingers at each other."

The solvents have been linked by some studies to birth defects and cancer, but a recent draft EPA study concluded that air pollution and chemicals used to treat surface water pose more of a health threat to South Bay residents.

The discovery of trichloroethane (TCA) and other chemicals in private wells has forced the Great Oaks Water Co. to close 25 percent of its private wells, company president Berry Roeder told the subcommittee. Her firm serves 65,000 people in south San Jose.

Roeder told the subcommittee

that people are just going to have to get used to drinking water with low levels of toxic chemicals.

"As I see it, the problem is that nobody is educating the public to accept light contamination," she said. "The public — call them hysterical housewives if you like — will not accept even light contamination today. They are scared."

Ray AbuZayyad, president of IBM's general products division in San Jose, told the subcommittee that his company has spent \$25 million to clean up toxic spills.

Much of the money has been spent on pumping huge amounts of contaminated water out of underground aquifers. IBM pumps out about 8 million gallons of water per day to get rid of about 8 ounces of TCA.

All together, firms in Silicon Valley pump about 19 million gallons of contaminated water out of underground reservoirs every day, according to David Morell, a toxics consultant to Santa Clara County.

The contaminated water is treated to the point that it is no longer a hazardous waste, then dumped into the Bay. The so-called "pump and dump" method is cheaper than treating the water to the point that it can be used as drinking water, Morell said.

"We are replacing the water, but at a high social cost," he told the subcommittee.

Santa Clara County Supervisor Susanne Wilson blamed the state government for dragging its feet on cleanup efforts.

Wilson said there is "a lack of

commitment on the part of the state government to the management of toxic contamination of our water supplies."

Gov. Deukmejian, she said, vetoed a bill to add 22 staff members to the San Francisco Bay Regional Quality Control Board. Because of short staffing, she said, the regional board has only been able to clean up one of nearly 100 toxic contamination sites in the Bay Area.

"The longer the state withholds necessary resources, the greater is the likelihood that toxic plumes will spread," Wilson said.

Wilson also told the subcommittee that present efforts to monitor wells and close contaminated water sources do nothing to preserve the underground water supplies themselves.