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# Times Tribune

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Saturday, October 12, 1985

San Mateo County edition

## Environmentalists blast EPA study

By Marlo Dianda  
Times Tribune staff

Despite frequently spilling or leaking toxic chemicals into the underground, Silicon Valley's high-technology industries hardly threaten the public's health, a federal study indicates.

A preliminary report released Friday by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency suggests that Santa Clara County residents are better off drinking ground water than chlorinated surface water.

Environmentalists quickly criticized the report, which they said appears to absolve high-tech industries from contributing to the Bay

Area's ecological degradation.

"They're making all those conclusions while admitting they don't have enough data," said Ted Smith, a representative of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition.

The \$1.1 million preliminary report indicates, for example, that air polluted by wood-burning stoves, car-choked intersections or hospitals are more likely to cause cancer or other illnesses than water contaminated by the industries.

Pollutants from smokestack industries, such as the coal-fired Kaiser Cement Corp. near Cupertino, continue to pose a greater public health threat than high-tech industries,

according to the report.

"We have found that the environmental risks in Silicon Valley are comparatively low," said Keith Hinman, manager of the Integrated Environmental Management Project. "Overall, most of the public risks are from sources and pollutants that are common in most urban areas."

Pollutant levels in Santa Clara County "are generally comparable to or lower than" pollutant levels elsewhere, he added.

Thanks largely to the diligence of local governments and industries, "much of the individual risk in Silicon Valley may have already been managed," added John Wise,

EPA's deputy regional administrator.

Santa Clara County, for example, adopted a hazardous-materials ordinance that allows officials to identify and monitor underground storage tanks that have the potential of leaking into ground-water supplies.

Wise's assurances, however, were greeted with skepticism by South Bay officials and environmentalists.

Even the San Jose-based Semiconductor Industry Association, which was accused of lobbying EPA officials in Washington to change the report, criticized the report's assumptions.

The trade group said it was pleased that the report found "industry's efforts to manage chemicals and to respond by cleaning up spills have been effective."

Sunnyvale City Councilwoman Lynn Brlody, a member of an intergovernmental coordinating committee of South Bay representatives, said that kudos aside, the report seems to convey a false sense of security.

The report appears to imply that anyone who does not live near a busy intersection or downwind of a hospital can feel safe, Brlody said.

Brlody also complained that the



Ted Smith  
... coalition representative.

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report "assumes everything done to date will continue to work."

In a written response to the report, the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition and Citizens for a Better Environment said its findings "can only underestimate the public health risks posed by toxics."

The EPA's study, launched in April 1983, attempts to evaluate how different forms of toxic pollutants in the air, water and land combine to threaten public health.

Before the federal agency decides what to do about the report's findings, it will subject it to intense public scrutiny over the next six months.

Of thousands of pollutants that the EPA could have studied, it concentrated on 30 kinds of metals, organic gases and organic particulates considered most likely to pose health risks in the valley.

EPA officials acknowledged that other potentially hazardous pollutants escaped its review because little information exists about them.

According to the report, Silicon Valley's smog is expected to annually cause only two more cancer deaths. Two years ago, 1,170 people in the county died of cancer.

Eileen Soffer, an EPA air specialist, said that arsenic, chromium and other metal pollutants from residential heating sources such as wood-burning stoves and fireplaces pose 40 percent of the cancer risk, while similar pollutants from cars and trucks pose 27 percent.

The report also indicated that only one cancer death could be expected every 30 years from someone who drinks ground water.

Half of the county's residents, mostly those living in the baylands or around San Jose, get their water from public and private wells.

"Just a few people in Silicon Valley are exposed" to ground-water contamination, said Don Schwartz, EPA's water specialist.

He said that about 5 percent of the county's residents are exposed to trace amounts of pollutants in their ground water.

The reason, he added, is because an underlying clay barrier prevents toxic wastes from spreading into drinking water supplies.

Schwartz cautioned that people who obtain drinking water from private wells may face a greater danger than those whose water comes from public wells.

County residents who drink water imported from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir or the Central Valley stand a slightly greater chance of contracting liver cancer than ground-water drinkers, Schwartz said.

Byproducts from chlorinated surface water, such as chloroform, may be expected to cause two cancer liver deaths a year, he added.

Because the Santa Clara Valley Water District recently has changed its disinfectant process, the cancer risk now should be reduced substantially, he said.

Arsenic found in trace amounts of local drinking water also may lead to eight cases a year of Blackfoot disease, a form of treatable skin cancer, according to the report.

Rod Diridon, chairman of the Board of Supervisors, said he is disappointed that the report does not look at more non-cancerous health risks posed by pollutants.

Diridon told EPA officials he also regrets that a "local advocacy group," the Semiconductor Industry Association, "circumvented the local process and tried to influence you."

Frank Fahrenkoph Jr., an attorney who represents the association, several weeks ago met with EPA officials in Washington and tried to lobby them into revamping the report, which the association said is based on outdated data.

Fahrenkoph is chairman of the Republican National Committee, so his role in meeting with officials has been publicly criticized.

"There is a difference between access (to EPA officials) and trying to change what is going to be contained in the report," said Supervisor Dianne McKenna.

"Now there's a little doubt" about the report's credibility, Diridon said, noting that association members "shot themselves in the foot."

Mike Belliveau, research director of Citizens for a Better Environment, said the report is inherently deficient because it examined "only a small handful of pollutants and doesn't look at all sources of exposure."

The agency's suggestion that contaminated ground water poses only minimal health risks is based on the unrealistic assumption that various governmental agencies and industries will aggressively monitor and clean up spills or leaks, Belliveau added.

But David Morell, the county's new toxic coordinator, said he believes the report will prove a helpful tool in dealing with pollutants.

What the report attempts to do is answer the question of "how safe is acceptable?" Morell said.