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Tainted water spreading, activists say

By Cathie Calvert
and Elias Castillo
Mercury News Staff Writers

Environmentalists today revealed what they called a "stunning" governmental memo that shows cleanup of contaminated underground water from the South San Jose IBM and Fairchild Camera & Instrument Corp. sites is spreading minute traces of contamination to other drinking water wells.

The so-called "pump and dump" method of depositing untreated contaminated underground water into Canoas Creek via a sewage and storm drain is contaminating new wells outside the original clean-up zone, Ted Smith, chairman of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, said today.

He said thousands of San Jose Water Co. users in the South San Jose area are affected.

Water company officials were

not immediately available for comment.

Smith said today's press conference at the Fairchild well site was called after members of the toxics coalition discovered an internal memo written on May 13 by Peter Johnson, a ground water engineering investigator for the California Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The memo, Smith said, reported that conditions "strongly support

the contention that Canoas Creek is recharging in the Blossom Hill/Branham Lane area and that this recharging may be impacting a municipal water supply system."

Recharging means that surface water percolates down and becomes underground water.

The memo, Smith said, reports that trichloroethane, a potentially toxic solvent used heavily in elec-

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tronics manufacturing, has been found in the areas outside the original South San Jose clean-up region.

TCA was found in both the creek and in drinking wells, thus linking the find to the IBM-Fairchild clean-up, Smith said the memo reported. As Smith spoke, pumped water from the well gushed into the storm drain.

Smith said that the level of contamination in Canoas Creeks is three to six parts per billion. State standards limit contamination of water by TCA to 200 parts per billion. However, Smith maintained that the level of TCA pollution that could be considered safe is not clear at this time.

At a news conference, Smith displayed a large map tracing the route of the water.

He said the state memo indicated that the recharging of contaminated water into new wells appeared to be "continuous and significant."

Smith said the memo supports the environmentalists' longtime stand that contaminated water should be treated before being dumped into waterways, such as creeks.

He said that the importance of the memo, which he praised Johnson for having written, is "stunning" in its apparent implications.

"I think most people will find it mind-boggling the way pump-and-dump works. An awful lot of people have been lulled into a false sense of complacency by industry claims that clean-up is going quite well," Smith said.

He said the memo was discovered in a routine examination of water quality control board public records by environmental groups in preparation for a session Wednesday by the board.

"The board tomorrow will hold an important hearing to evaluate the whole policy of pumping and dumping of untreated contaminated water," Smith said.

"We hope to be able to persuade the regional water quality control board tomorrow to tighten up its pump-and-dump policy so that more wells don't become contaminated by so-called clean-up operations," he said.

In addition, Smith said, environmental groups on Wednesday will ask the water quality control board to examine whether IBM and Fairchild violated clean-up permits by allegedly contaminating other drinking water wells.