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Decisions in ground-water cases criticized

Mtn. View study may take 1 1/2 years

By Michael Rezendes
Mercury News Staff Writer

Studies lasting at least 1 1/2 more years are needed before federal officials can accelerate the cleanup of the deepest ground-water contamination yet discovered in Santa Clara Valley, a federal official said Monday.

Having to wait that long is "dis-

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couraging," Santa Clara County's chief toxics expert responded.

On Friday, the Environmental Protection Agency notified county officials that high levels of cancer-causing chemicals had been discovered in a deep aquifer

beneath the Fairchild Semiconductor Corp., where a leak of toxic chemicals was discovered in 1982. That aquifer supplies drinking water in areas of Mountain View, though the contamination found in it has not reached drinking-water wells, EPA officials said.

Harry Seraydarian, toxics and
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IBM wins victory on pollution monitoring

By Susan Yoachum
Mercury News Sacramento Bureau

SACRAMENTO — In a victory for IBM Corp., the state Water Resources Control Board on Monday adopted an order that requires less monitoring of underground water contamination in South San Jose than local officials and environmentalists had sought.

"We're very pleased with the order," said IBM spokesman Jack Butler. "We regard the board's decision as a vote of confidence in our program."

On the other side, Ted Smith — the San Jose attorney who heads the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition — said, "It's a real shame we now have a state water board only too

willing to play handmaiden to polluting companies such as IBM."

But while county officials and environmentalists expressed disappointment that the state board's order will not require the extensive monitoring originally recommended by the state board's staff, they were more dismayed by an

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Cleanup of deep-level toxic well in Mtn. View must await study

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waste management division director for the EPA's San Francisco office, said Monday that it will take 18 months for a study financed by three private companies to measure the cancer-causing pollutants and determine the best way to get rid of them.

"Until you really know the extent of the contamination in that aquifer, you can't really estimate what it would take to complete a cleanup," he said.

David Morell, the county's toxics expert and a former EPA official, said: "In general, it certainly seems discouraging that contamination of such obvious concern to so many people requires such a lengthy period of study before action can be taken."

In a memo to county supervisors and County Executive Sally Reed, Morell said the pollution is "the first confirmed finding of such contamination ever in the deep aquifers of Santa Clara Valley."

The discovery was made by taking samples from special monitoring wells from March 24 to April 29, Morell said.

Among the pollutants discovered in the deep aquifer is trichloroethylene, an industrial cleaning solvent known to cause liver cancer in mice. In his memo, Morell said TCE had been discovered at depths to 500 feet.

Several experts say the discovery of the pollutants in Santa Clara Valley's deepest aquifers increases

the chance that they could find their way into public drinking water supplies. Previously, experts had believed the valley's deepest aquifers were protected by layers of clay and could not be reached by leaked toxic chemicals.

Other drinking-water wells in the county previously found to have been contaminated drew their water from shallower aquifers.

Mountain View officials say their nearest drinking-water well is just under a mile from the site where the contamination was discovered. They say the well has been closed since February for routine maintenance and that no TCE has been found in it.

Although Mountain View gets only 15 percent of its drinking water from wells, city council member Jim Zesch says he's worried about the recent findings.

"It has implications for the long-term ability to continue to use deep water aquifers for domestic water supplies," he said.

The contamination site — along the Bayshore Freeway and Moffett Field — has been dubbed the Mountain View Five because five companies have been blamed, starting with contamination discovered in 1982 near a plant owned by Intel Corp. The other companies are Fairchild, Raytheon, Siltec Corp. and NEC Corp.

Three of those companies — Fairchild, Raytheon and Intel — have agreed to share the costs of

monitoring and cleaning up the contamination under EPA supervision.

Cleaning of polluted water at shallow levels already has begun. As a result of the discovery of contamination in the deep aquifers, Fairchild is planning to install two additional clusters of monitoring wells to trace movement of the pollutants through ground-water supplies, company spokeswoman Francine Plaza said.

Susanne Wilson, chairwoman of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors and the board's lead authority on water contamination, said she'll ask the board today to request a detailed briefing on the EPA's efforts to clean up contamination at the Fairchild site. In addition, Wilson said she'll ask the board to have the county health department:

- ✓ Identify all drinking-water supplies within two miles of the site and find out when they were last tested for contamination.

- ✓ Determine whether deep monitoring wells ought to be dug at other contamination sites in other areas of the county.

- ✓ Explore ways of paying for a study of purifying contaminated water "at the wellhead." This type of cleaning may be needed, she said, if it proves too costly or too difficult to clean polluted water from deep aquifers.

Mercury News Staff Writer Janet Wells contributed to this report.