

Silicon Valley Workers Claim Toxics Peril the Unborn

By Elliot Diringer

Silicon Valley's massive electronics industry was accused yesterday of forcing its workers to choose between their jobs and the right to have healthy babies.

The charges came at a legislative hearing in Sunnyvale focusing on potential dangers to workers and their unborn children from toxic chemicals in the high-tech workplace.

Production worker Jeanie Patterson said that when she became pregnant her employer demanded that she get a doctor's approval to continue at her job. When the doctor refused, she said, the company suggested she quit.

"They were telling me I had to choose between having a healthy family and having my job," Patterson told the state Senate toxics committee. "That's not an answer I can accept."

Others testified that Patterson's experience is all too common among the Silicon Valley work-

force, which is made up primarily of women of child-bearing age, many of them Hispanic or Asian.

"They should remove the chemicals, not the workers," said Alicia Orosco of the Santa Clara Committee on Occupational Safety

'I had to choose between having a healthy family and having my job'

and Health, which receives several calls a week from workers worried about chemical exposure.

The image of widespread toxic danger that emerged at the hearing remained un rebutted because there was no one there to present the industry point of view.

"Representatives of the semiconductor industry have chosen not to be here," said Senator Art Torres, D-Los Angeles. "Apparently they

are uncomfortable with a public discussion of the issue of toxics."

Contacted later, however, representatives of the Semiconductor Industry Association denied they had refused to appear, saying they had been called on short notice and did not have time to prepare.

"We're not trying to hide anything," said Lee Neal, the association's director of occupational safety and health. "I think it's unfortunate the way it came down because I'm sure it created the wrong impression."

Although Silicon Valley's boasts of "clean" high-tech industry have been deflated by the discovery of contaminated drinking water, workers complained yesterday that the industry's biggest toxic threat has been virtually ignored.

"People get extremely irritated with the water pollution issue," said Patterson. "But they don't understand that these people are going to work with these chemicals for 8- and 10- and 12-hour shifts, as well as going home and drinking the water. So we get double exposure."

The concern about worker exposure has been simmering for more than a decade but was heightened last year when a Massachusetts study — the first of its kind — found unusually high miscarriage rates among workers at the Digital Electronics Corp., a semiconductor manufacturer.

A different study focusing on Silicon Valley neighborhoods with polluted groundwater found abnormally high rates of birth defects, but the study did not look at workplace exposures.

The industry association plans to begin a comprehensive study next year that will examine reproductive and other health effects throughout the industry.

Yesterday, however, there were complaints that worker and community representatives, as well as the state Department of Health Services, had been denied the opportunity to help plan the research.

"It's not going to be a balanced study," charged Amanda Hawes of the Santa Clara Committee on Occupational Safety and Health. "It should be independent and open."

Linda Rudolph, an epidemiologist with the state Department of Health Services, said she had proposed that her agency launch a study of its own, but the idea was turned down "at some higher level of the department."

"Every time we've added more money to your department to conduct these and other studies, the governor has used his little blue pencil to knock those resources out," complained Torres.