

Groups criticize chip industry's worker policies

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they aren't seeking to ban any single chemical, but hope to encourage the industry to re-examine the full range of toxic gases and liquids it uses to etch silicon wafers to see if they can be replaced with nontoxic substances.

Falling that, they say the industry should concentrate on removing all traces of chemical exposure from the workplace. If "medical removal" of workers is called for because of reproductive fears, they say, men and women should be treated equally.

To transfer only women is discriminatory, they add, and if unchecked could lead to unfair hiring and promotion policies.

Masscosh and three other advocacy groups that have joined it also criticized Digital and the authors of the study, done by the University of Massachusetts, for releasing only a summary of it to the public.

Libby Averill of Double Exposure, a Boston-based women's group concerned with reproductive issues, added that Digital's policy of "encouraging" pregnant women to leave production amount virtually to a ban on such work. "It sounds like it has the potential of being fairly harassing," she said.

Digital says it is offering to transfer any women of childbearing age who requests it off the production lines as a precautionary measure only.

Jeffrey Gibson, a Digital spokesman, said the company is also willing to transfer men concerned about reproductive hazards, but will not guarantee transfers as with women. Gibson said no male workers have requested such transfers.

The Digital study looked for but found no evidence of reproductive disorders among men, Gibson maintained. He conceded, however, that that aspect of the study was not conclusive because of the sampling size.

What the study did find was that women production workers at Digital's Hudson plant suffered twice the miscarriage rate of other women workers at the plant. The UMass authors of the study are withholding full release of it, they say, pending peer review of it and publication in a medical journal.

Groups hit chip industry's policies

By Bruce Butterfield
Globe Staff

In joint action yesterday, however, occupational health and safety, adding that reproductive chemical hazards, if they exist, have been found generally to affect both sexes.

A spokeswoman for AT&T Technology Systems in New Jersey, Lydia Whitefield, said the company was seeking to protect its employees, not discriminate against them, in its latest action.

In California, meanwhile, a coalition of health and environmental groups in the Silicon Valley south of San Francisco announced yesterday that it would work to ban at least one type of chemical used by chip makers, known as glycol ethers, which has been linked to reproductive disorders.

The Massachusetts groups say "If they chose to remove work-ers, they should look to men too."

Occupational Safety and Health (Masscosh) said it has adopted a policy of "encouraging" pregnant women to leave the production lines and take other jobs within the company.

Digital Equipment Corp., which commissioned the study at its Hudson plant, said it has plants nationwide.

"We think they should focus on removing chemicals, rather than workers," said Nancy Lesin, head of one of the Massachusetts groups - the labor-backed Occupational Safety and Health Commission.

Based on that study, American Telephone & Telegraph confirmed earlier this week that it is prohibiting pregnant women from production work in five AT&T chip plants nationwide.

The groups said that various gases and chemicals used in the chip-making process pose potential reproductive hazards to men as well as women, and are being eliminated for all workers.

"The groups said that various pregnant women off production lines in the wake of a Massachusetts study finding high miscarriage rates among chip makers.

The nation's semiconductor industry is facing mounting criticism from health and worker advocacy groups for taking only a limited approach to protecting pregnant women off production lines in the wake of a Massachusetts study finding high miscarriage rates among chip makers.

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Digital Equipment Corp., which commissioned the study at its Hudson plant, said it has adopted a policy of "encouraging" pregnant women to leave the production lines and take other jobs within the company.

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