

# Chip industry proposal

## State considers health probe

By Mitchell Benson  
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State health officials want to conduct a detailed health study of semiconductor industry workers, but they say chip manufacturers must cooperate and even help foot the bill to get a credible job done.

A solid epidemiological study — attempting to identify trends and patterns in diseases and other health problems — “would cost about \$500,000 to conduct, give or take a hundred thousand or two on either side,” said Dr. Linda Rudolph, a state occupational health specialist. “We are in the process of trying to figure out how best to proceed.”

For several years, environmentalists and workers' rights advocates have been calling for a long-term health study of the industry because of the toxic chemicals used and the fact that there has never been a comprehensive look at the health of the American chip production worker.

Pressure for such a project has increased since the release last month of a study of a Massachusetts semiconductor chip plant that showed a high rate of miscarriages among production line workers.

But amid the current budget tightening at both state and federal levels, state health officials say it is unlikely that government money will be available soon to help pay for the work.

“It is not realistic to wait for state funding,” said Shanna Swan, a chief in the state's epidemiological studies section. “Industry is key to the success of the study, both in terms of money and access” to workers, their records and their work place.

Industry officials are not saying what, if any, role they are willing to play until a special task force later this month reviews the Massachusetts study, conducted at a Digital Equipment Corp. plant in Hudson, Mass. The task force is then expected to recommend changes in the industry's health and personnel policies.

“Until that comes in, that's all I

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# Industry called key to study

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often ask workers to fill out a series of questionnaires, followed by personal interviews, followed by physical examinations.

They also examine medical records and, if available, records of what the workers were exposed to and how much.

Then they turn to their computers for some intensive fact-and-number-crunching, looking for patterns.

The Mercury News reported last month that the Digital Equipment study showed that production workers at the Hudson plant suffered twice the miscarriage rate of other women there. It showed that exposure rates in the semiconductor industry than anybody, state or federal.

The chip-making process is a complicated one in which workers wearing protective “bunny suits” use precision equipment and toxic gases and liquids to sketch microscopic circuits onto silicon chips.

When epidemiologists — sometimes referred to as disease detectives — go about their studies, they

But a preliminary report on the and birth defects.

lems, including cancer, infertility workers showed no increased incidence of a variety of health problems, including cancer, infertility

The study of 770 workers had some bright spots, too: Production workers showed no increased incidence of a variety of health problems, including cancer, infertility

The lead author of the study, John Froines of the UCLA School of Public Health, met Friday in San Jose with environmentalists and local government and industry officials to discuss the study.

Froines reiterated his interest in a health study of semiconductor industry workers, in part because he believes it is an industry innovation enough to overcome any health problems.