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# Brock seeks chip-worker risk probe

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U.S. Labor Secretary William Brock has asked the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to investigate allegations of excessive health problems among workers in the nation's semiconductor industry, the Labor Department confirmed Tuesday.

Brock apparently took the action in response to a personal appeal from Morton Bahr, president of the Communication Workers of America, for a government investigation of chip-making hazards.

"We do have instructions from the (labor) secretary to look into this situation and get back to him," OSHA spokesman Terry Mikelson confirmed Tuesday night.

The Labor Department's action comes amid growing calls from unions and occupational health groups that semiconductor manufacturers cut their use of toxic chemicals and take a closer look at how those chemicals affect their employees.

"This is great, and I think that's something long overdue," said Meta Mendel-Reyes, director of the San Jose-based Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health.

Last week, the 700,000-member CWA announced it was joining a coalition of more than 35 labor unions, public interest and women's rights groups in a nationwide drive aimed at forcing chip makers to remove potentially hazardous chemicals from the chip-making process — or remove workers exposed to them.

The national drive was spurred by a campaign started earlier in Silicon Valley by three groups — the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health and Injured Workers United.

Both campaigns were formed after semiconductor workers at Digital Equipment Corp.'s plant in Hudson, Mass., were studied. The study found twice the expected rate of miscarriages among some women production workers and higher worker-reported rates of general illness such as headaches and nausea.

The Digital-sponsored study, conducted by researchers from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, did not link any of the reported illnesses with chemicals used in chip making. But based on the study, several leading chip makers — including Digital and American Telephone & Telegraph — are removing pregnant women from production lines.

Mercury News Environment Writer Mitchell Benson contributed to this report.

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this report