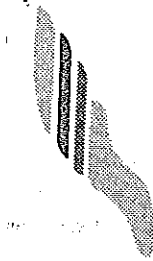


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San Jose

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Editorials

Monday, March 23, 1987

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## SLOW-GOING ON TOXICS

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The EPA was rightly critical of San Jose's lagging cleanup program

**A**N Environmental Protection Agency study has raised disturbing questions about the state of hazardous materials storage and toxics cleanup in Santa Clara County.

A draft report released last week makes clear that action is needed on two fronts to ensure the safe storage of toxics in the county.

While commending the progress made by most Silicon Valley communities in identifying and inspecting storage sites, the EPA is critical of San Jose's effort.

And rightly so. Under the city's Hazardous Materials Program, 1,660 toxics storage facilities were to be inspected and issued permits by October 1986. To date, only about half have been dealt with.

To their credit, city leaders seem to be responding with speed and resolve.

Although some officials have blamed the city's poor performance on former program administrator Peter W. Jones, who mysteriously disappeared in January, others concede that the monitoring program was beset by structural problems. They say the director's dual accountability to the fire department and city manager's office made final authority for the program unclear, while the program staff was burdened with tasks not related to its monitoring mission.

Assistant City Manager Les White says Jones' successor will answer only to the fire department, and that the city's office of environmental management will assume some tasks. The city is committed to

"thoroughly understanding just what did go wrong," White says.

Unfortunately, the larger problem of cleaning up toxic spills defies the type of head-on approach San Jose is using to untangle an administrative snarl.

According to the EPA, in 90 percent of the more than 320 cases where an underground leak has been discovered in Santa Clara County, no determination has been made as to whether chemicals have seeped into nearby ground water.

Cities and counties generally don't have the means or expertise needed for cleanup. Whether they have the legal authority also is debatable.

California law vests the state and regional water resource control boards with authority to clean up below-surface contamination. However, Gov. Deukmejian has vetoed funds to create an effective cleanup program.

One possible solution is to have local water districts handle some of the cleanup, with regional boards providing guidance and assistance. Such an approach is being tried in Santa Clara County.

Employees of the Santa Clara Valley Water District, on "loan" to and under the supervision of the Bay Area regional water board, soon will begin cleanup of fuel tank leaks throughout Santa Clara County. Meanwhile, the hard-pressed regional staff will continue to concentrate on major spills, such as those at several Silicon Valley high-tech firms.

However, officials say, this stopgap can't adequately address the problem of leaks.

It is crucial that some accommodation be reached between the governor's office and regional and local water authorities. To have an effective monitoring program, but no mechanism for responding to the alarms it sounds, is the height of illogic.