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Cleanup May Take 300 Years

Mountain View's Toxic Groundwater

By Elliot Diringer
Chronicle Staff Writer

The Environmental Protection Agency said yesterday that it could take \$55 million and up to 300 years to clean up a toxic groundwater mess that has turned out to be one of the worst in Silicon Valley.

More than 70 chemicals have been identified in a plume of contamination that leaked from a cluster of Mountain View companies and now stretches more than 1½ miles under Highway 101 and the Moffett Field Naval Air Station.

The principal pollutant, a suspected carcinogen called trichlorethylene, has been measured in the groundwater beneath the industrial sites at levels as high as 1 million parts per billion.

"That's as high as I've ever heard of," said a state water official involved in many cleanups around the Bay Area. "That's about as bad as it gets."

A drinking well supplying the Santa Clara Valley Water District is located just half a mile from the polluted groundwater, but EPA officials said the plume is moving in the opposite direction and there is no danger to public health.

The contaminated area, however, is considered a potential water source that could be tapped in the event of a prolonged drought, and EPA wants it made clean enough to drink.

At a community meeting last night in Mountain View, the agency outlined a cleanup strategy that would require the polluting companies to spend up to \$55 million to extract pollutants from the soil and

pump tainted water from the ground.

Amy Zimpfer, the EPA official overseeing the cleanup, said most of the decontamination could be achieved in 20 years. But because of the high pollutant levels and the density of soil in the aquifer, or underground reservoir, it could take 300 years of pumping to reach the final cleanup goal, she said.

Three of the companies — Fairchild Semiconductor, Intel and Raytheon — have already taken initial cleanup steps. Zimpfer said EPA will soon notify 19 other firms that they will be expected to pick up part of the tab.

EPA's final cleanup order is not expected until some time next year, and environmentalists are worried that the companies will pressure the agency to relax its cleanup goals.

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