

BUSINESS

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OSHA inspectors drop in on Silicon Valley plants

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In surprise visits to seven high-technology plants in California this week, federal inspectors found some violations of health and safety rules, but no citations have yet been issued.

The inspections are part of a pilot program launched Monday by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which is investigating how well the semiconductor industry is protecting its workers from hazardous chemicals and gases.

Frank Strasheim, OSHA's regional administrator in San Francisco, said Thursday none of the violations uncovered so far were considered serious, meaning those

that could lead to serious injury or death.

In Silicon Valley, the agency has begun "wall-to-wall inspections" at National Semiconductor Corp., a Santa Clara chip maker; Xicor Inc., a Milpitas electronic equipment company; and Varian Associates Inc., a Palo Alto company that makes semiconductor equipment and other electronic components.

Varian spokesman Gary Simpson said OSHA officials had arrived at the company's Santa Clara plant Thursday morning. The inspection is expected to continue through Monday and will include several Varian sites, he said.

OSHA also has visited companies in Sacramento and San Diego. The

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inspections, which typically take about two days, include tours of the plant and interviews with employees and company officials.

Strasheim said OSHA had accelerated plans to set up the program following the discovery last month of potentially dangerous containers of silane gas at several Silicon Valley plants.

The gas cylinders, which were linked to an earlier fatal explosion in New Jersey, were destroyed because of concerns that they were contaminated with another explosive gas.

On the whole, Strasheim said, the semiconductor industry is considered a safe one. But since it relies on a variety of toxic gases and chemicals, OSHA decided to scrutinize it more closely.

"We want to find out if the semiconductor industry is inherently safe, or just coincidentally safe," he

said.

Some industry experts dispute Strasheim's claim that the industry deserves a clean bill of health.

Joseph Ladou, acting chief of the division of occupational and environmental medicine at UC-San Francisco, said some industry statistics on the issue were misleading.

Most of the injuries and illnesses occur among production workers, who make up a small percentage of the industry's overall work force. When white-collar workers are included in those studies, they skew the results, he said.

According to Ladou, the industry has a higher rate of injury and illnesses compared with other light manufacturers when professional workers are excluded from the count.

But Ladou applauded OSHA's action. "It's very exciting that someone is doing unannounced inspections of these companies," he said.

Ted Smith, director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, a San Jose industry watchdog group, said he was worried that OSHA inspec-

tors were not equipped to handle the inspections.

"I'm concerned that they won't know what to look for," Smith said. "In the past, they have been lulled into a false sense of complacency and given this industry a Good Housekeeping seal of approval when it wasn't warranted."

Strasheim countered that specially trained members of OSHA's Health Response Team in Salt Lake City would accompany local OSHA inspectors on the visits. He said the agency also would be analyzing the industry's injury and illness records.

Strasheim said the companies, which were chosen at random, had responded favorably. The state has close to 700 high-tech plants that employ 77,000 people, he said.

"After we've done about 70 of these inspections, we will take a look and decide whether we should (expand) the program," Strasheim said.

As part of the program, the agency has set up a toll-free telephone number to safety concerns. The number is 800-848-1003.