

Group Cites High-Tech Firms' Pollution Silicon Valley Accused of Spewing Tons of Chemicals Into the Air

By MARK A. STEIN, *Times Staff Writer*

SAN JOSE—An environmental group Tuesday cited newly disclosed data on chemical use by the Silicon Valley semiconductor industry to press for tougher toxics regulations, fulfilling predictions that new federal disclosure rules will ratchet up pressure for a new, stricter generation of environmental laws.

At a press conference called a month and a day after sweeping new federal "right-to-know" rules required even some small companies to disclose the type and amount of hazardous chemicals they release into the atmosphere, the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition argued that the data shows that semiconductor firms use the skies between San Jose and San Francisco as "an open sewer" for the disposal of 12 million pounds of gases and vapors annually.

"It's time the companies stop using the air as their sewer," said Ted Smith, executive director of the environmental group, "and it's time to start reducing the amounts of these materials they use."

He said that unless industry commits itself to strict and binding pledges to cut both consumption and disposal of such chemicals, stricter and broader federal stand-

ards should be imposed. He said one company, Monsanto, already has said it will try to cut its use of one compound by 90% through better management and substitutions.

Smith stopped short of saying that the chemicals released by industry here are actually harming public health, and both industry officials and regulators at the Bay Area Air Quality Management District downplayed the significance of the disclosures.

"All of these chemicals are well within [federal emission] standards," said John Hassell, spokesman for FMC Corp., which was cited by the toxics coalition as one of the "Silicon Valley's Dirty Dozen," or 12 worst polluters.

"Those overall numbers [12 million pounds] are not terribly revealing," said Steve Hill, air toxics evaluation manager for the regional air quality district. "It's not very meaningful when you consider an area the size of Santa Clara County."

Many of the compounds counted among the 12-million-pound annual total are considered "low-priority" pollutants by the district, he said, and are in volumes predicted in earlier district estimates.

Others, Hill conceded, are poten-

tially unhealthful, but only when people are exposed to them in certain concentrations. The data required by the new law does not estimate human exposure levels, so the effect of the disposal is impossible to calculate accurately.

Smith countered that some chemicals are known to be harmful in any amount. One he cited is Freon, a chlorofluorocarbon that is used as a degreasing solvent by microchip makers and is known to deplete ozone in the upper atmosphere.

Smith said he already has used the data to pressure companies to reduce their reliance on such compounds, and he said other environmental groups in Texas, Washington and California are doing the same.

Such activism was predicted when the new disclosure requirements took effect July 1. A Texas consultant called the disclosure rules "extraordinarily revolutionary," while a senior federal Environmental Protection Agency official called it "a major change in the way that toxic emissions have been dealt with because it involves a whole new set of actors—the citizens."



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