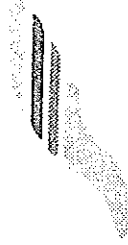


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Editorials

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Shape up, Moffett

Get on with the cleanup of solvents and chemicals that seeped into the ground

MOFFETT Field may have signed a ground-breaking agreement last week on groundwater cleanup, but the pace of the cleanup is the same old Moffett: slow as molasses.

That's why the agreement, for all its significance, isn't winning any friends for the air station.

When Moffett entered an interagency agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency and state regulatory agencies, it became the first naval base in the country to commit to a specific schedule of toxic cleanup.

It's about time. For 40 years the Navy has been allowing fuels, oils, solvents, pesticides and other chemicals to seep into the ground. At last count there were 19 contamination sites at the air station, which is a federal Superfund site. State agencies had been trying for five years, with no success, to get Moffett to move on a cleanup plan.

But the cleanup the Navy has just promised won't start until 1995, and that has private-industry neighbors furious. The Moffett contamination plume is next to the infamous Middlefield-Ellis-Whis-

man (MEW) plume, which three high-tech companies have agreed to clean up, starting next year.

Company spokesmen say the plumes are connected, just west of the Moffett runways, and state water-quality officials tell us that's probably true. The companies worry that when they pump MEW contaminants out of the groundwater they'll be pumping Moffett contaminants as well. That's not fair.

Insisting on simultaneous, comprehensive cleanups, however, is unrealistic. The trouble at Moffett is that the Navy has done so little that no one knows the extent of the air station's contamination.

But that doesn't mean the companies should wait until Moffett has finished its exhaustive studies; that could take six years. Nor does it mean Moffett can excuse itself from any MEW cleanup help. Both the Navy and the companies say they're working on a private agreement on how Moffett can help at MEW. Surely the air station can get to work immediately, without years-long studies, to contain its contamination west of the runways, so the MEW cleanup can proceed not only on schedule but also efficiently.

This is a case of two underground plumes having been neglected so long that they've merged. They pose no immediate threat to Mountain View's drinking water, but they're moving toward the bay — a bay that is under enough toxic assault already. The time for delays passed long ago.