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Peace, love, Earth Day and holding hands with IBM

By MICHAEL KREY

A year ago local environmentalists stood shaking their fists in a demonstration against corporate polluter IBM. This year the two groups will be holding hands.

A year apparently is a lifetime in the environmental cleanup world; in that span one of Silicon Valley's biggest polluters has gone from bad guy to good guy.

After a month or so of intense talks, IBM Corp. and the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition have agreed to join in a previously difficult-to-imagine Earth Day celebration of good will.

"We'll be saying a lot of things that IBM will appreciate," said Ted Smith, chairman of SVTC, the most militant and visible of the county's environmental groups.

According to the coalition, IBM's South San Jose operation, which manufactures storage devices, still releases more chlorofluorocarbons into the air than any other site in the county. Chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs,

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Environmentalists join hands with Big Blue on Earth Day

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are the toxic compounds found in aerosol sprays and refrigerants, among other items. Manufacturers use it as a cleaning compound.

"Based on our survey of the 25 largest CFC dischargers in the county, we're convinced that IBM is doing a better cleanup job than anyone," said Mr. Smith. "They should be commended for the progress they have made."

Only a year ago coalition members angrily picketed in front of IBM's manufacturing plant, decrying the company's environmental record. IBM's General Products Division, located at 5600 Cottle Road, is one of the county's largest manufacturing sites, with more than 8,000 employees.

IBM's stated goal is to eliminate its CFC discharge at the site by 1993. A company spokesman recently said that the firm was ahead of its schedule in achieving that goal.

Walt Keeshen Jr., IBM's local communications manager, said the Cottle Road plant released 1.5 million pounds of CFCs in 1987, but reduced that figure to 500,000 pounds in 1988 and about 335,000 pounds in 1989.

"Our cleanup is a major, active program," Mr. Keeshen said. "We feel we've made a lot of progress."

The Cottle Road operation also has a groundwater pollution problem that at one point got it nominated to become a federal Superfund site, a designation reserved for the most serious pollution situations. The firm is working on that

environmental problem as well.

The coalition and IBM were still hammering out details late last week, but plans call for a joint press conference to be held by IBM executives and coalition members, and perhaps tours of IBM highlighting its on-site cleanup efforts.

June Anderson, IBM's local manager of environmental programs, already has been named to the county's Earth Day Task Force.

Various events are planned daily April 16-22, highlighted by an April 22 rally at Plaza Park in downtown San Jose. Mayor Tom McEnery will lead a walk from City Hall to the park for all interested parties starting at about 11 a.m. Additional events, including a number of musical acts, are scheduled at the park from noon through 6 p.m.