

IBM DISK DRIVE FACTORY

Last time you took a shower, you were in direct contact with one of the world's most welcome environmental products: warm soapy water. No, it's not a very glamorous technological invention, but it sure does the trick.

The sprawling IBM disk drive factory in San Jose, California was the state's greatest threat to depletion of the ozone layer, and the nation's third greatest source of ozone-depleting emissions. Each year, more than 1.5 million pounds of chlorofluorocarbons were emitted to the atmosphere after being used to clean circuit boards and other electronic components.

Having learned of the emissions through the federal government's right-to-know regulations, a number of environmental groups decided to take action. Ted Smith, Executive Director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, explains that the group focused much of their efforts on an intensive protest on Earth Day, 1989. Over 2000 activists rallied and marched to the IBM facility with chants of "Hey hey, ho ho, CFC's have got to go!" The protesters were turned away from the front gate by a security officer who was visibly shaken. With seven television crews present, leaders asked IBM to sign a "Good Neighbor Agreement" promising a CFC phaseout. All to no avail.

But, the winds of change were blowing. A few months later, a *USA Today* front-page story drew massive attention to the plant's CFC problem. The environmental groups capitalized quickly, holding a series of press conferences to protest IBM's inaction. The pressure worked. By September, IBM presented a new position on its CFC policy—CFCs would be eliminated completely by 1993. Already, the company has reduced its CFC emissions by 95 percent, and IBM plans to eliminate the solvent's use completely by the end of 1991, two years ahead of the corporate target date.

The new process is delightfully elegant. The parts are now dipped in warm soapy water and carried by a moving track through various bays, where they are rinsed and dried with hot air in what resembles a miniature car wash. To IBM's surprise, the new process will pay for itself in three years and will save money thereafter. Dr. June Anderson, the plant's manager of environmental programs, exclaims, "I've never seen a project with this level of grass roots motivation by the engineering team. They got convinced that this was the right thing to do."

Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition has not let success slow them down. "We want other companies to follow IBM's example," says Smith. In 1990, they sent a survey to the largest dischargers of CFCs and methyl chloroform in the Bay Area to determine their progress in reducing emissions and to request commitment to a complete phaseout. With the help of other environmental groups, SVTC is pressing industry laggards to achieve more success stories.

While all businesses may not be able to move as swiftly as IBM, all the little ozone molecules up there must be smiling. Maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to move quickly enough to prevent thousands of needless skin cancer deaths.

All of which makes a great story, but let's not get carried away. According to the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, IBM's San Jose facility has handled chemicals so sloppily in the past that an underground toxic plume of methyl chloroform and freon now stretches for five miles in the aquifer under San Jose, contaminating numerous public and private wells. The company has staunchly resisted citizen appeals to admit the problem and help with the clean up. As activists will tell you, the battles never end.

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