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COMMENTARY

Electronics, environmentalists headed for clash

The electronics industry and the environmental movement appear headed for a showdown — an unfortunate confrontation that is unlikely to benefit anyone. Equally unfortunate is the level of emotion that has been injected into the debate. And it is that emotion that is distorting the picture and making it difficult to develop either clarity or consensus.

The debate gained new momentum in recent weeks, first with Congress passing an appropriations bill that requires Austin's Sematech to allocate 10 percent of its federal funds to environmental research, and later with the report that chemicals used by IBM had caused an unusually high rate of miscarriages among some of its employees.

Community groups have responded by pushing for cities to adopt more stringent and uniform environmental rules, in part to discourage firms from searching for laxer rules at alternate sites. These activists are keeping a vigilant eye on Austin, where several high-tech firms recently have relocated.

The issues are complicated because the electronics industry is forging new ground at a particularly fast pace — a pace that is sometimes so rapid, it is difficult to keep up with its advances and changes. The question, therefore, is how to handle the risks that accompany that innovation and progress. Avoiding risk is tantamount to halting growth. A better option is managing the phenomenon in order to minimize hazards.

The debate is a crucial one because electronics companies employ more workers in the United States than the auto, steel and aerospace industries combined. By 1996, these firms are ex-



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pected to account for 25 percent of the nation's manufacturing output. The fate of the industry, therefore, is closely linked to the economy's progress.

Electronics firms employ chemicals, gases, and other materials whose disposal sometimes creates environmental hazards and whose prolonged use could be damaging to the health of workers. Ten or more years ago, the problems were particularly serious. Ignorance reigned. Chemicals, for example, were stored in underground tanks which leaked and polluted drinking water supplies.

The industry got a black eye before it had reached adolescence. It now is entering adulthood, struggling to present a more responsible, environmentally conscious image. But it is an uphill battle.

A vast amount of information has been gathered and presented to the public and to the employees of high-tech firms. Some is accurate and valid; other material is out of date and irrelevant. Community groups, for example, heralded the congressional directive to Sematech as a victory. In fact, the consortium already was spending more than Congress has requested on environmental research. It makes good business sense to minimize risk and Sematech's raison d'être is to help its member companies become more efficient and competitive.

Deciding what material is important and what should be dismissed is nearly impossible. And assessing technical information is even more difficult, particularly for the layperson.

The IBM study can be interpreted in two ways. It can be viewed as confirmation that dangers loom within the walls of the high-tech industry. Alternately, it can be interpreted as responsible behavior by a company that spent a great deal of time and money studying the hazards its employees face, taking corrective action and sharing its research with its colleagues and competitors.

The high-tech industry is not uniformly clean, nor is it a public menace. Some companies are more responsible than others. Some processes are particularly safe, others carry more hazards. But it is rare for a company to spend large sums moving to escape environmental rules. For a start, there is no guarantee these regulations will not be tightened. And for another, companies are unlikely to choose Austin if they are seeking a polluter's haven. If companies have abandoned Silicon Valley in favor of Austin it is because we do not have the same high level of bureaucracy that serves only to slow progress.

It is all too easy to level blame. It is a lot more difficult to collect relevant, timely data, to bring the parties to the table and develop mutual trust. But unless that happens, the electronics industry risks getting caught in a political crossfire that will not serve the interests of its employees, the environment or the economy.

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