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Groups threaten chip firm boycott

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Local environmental groups said Friday they will launch a national boycott of semiconductor manufacturers that use a family of hazardous chemicals unless the companies agree to phase them out within a year.

The groups accused the industry of downplaying the potential dangers of glycol ethers, commonly used in the process of making computer chips. The compounds have been linked to cases of respiratory illness, fertility problems and miscarriage among production line workers.

"The electronics industry is stalling until there is a body count," said Amanda Hawes, director of the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health, a not-for-profit group.

But a spokesman for the biggest semiconductor company in Silicon Valley said the industry is moving as quickly as it can.

'One- to two-year process'

"I think they're going to have a boycott a lot of companies, if this is their approach," said Howard High, spokesman for Intel Corp. "We've made a commitment to pull glycol ethers, but even so, we figure it's a one- to two-year process because we have to rework the recipe to make our chips and requalify our products. If it were as simple as replacing one chemical with another, we'd already have done it."

High said Intel estimates it will cost "tens of millions of dollars" to replace glycol ethers with substitutes. Glycol ether is used in the photolithographic process to print circuit patterns on chips.

The boycott threat comes in response to a national study, released Thursday, that showed that women working in chip manufacturing have a 40 percent greater risk of having a miscarriage than women working outside the fabrication areas. The fab workers were 30 percent less likely to become pregnant than their non-production co-workers.

Phase-out recommended

The Semiconductor Industry Association was the sponsor of the \$3.8 million study of 15,000 workers that was performed by researchers at the University of California, Davis. The SIA has recommended that members phase out glycol ethers.

Groups involved in the boycott threat include the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health, the Asian Workers Health Project and the Campaign for Responsible Technology.