

Commentary

10 years after our loss of innocence

Progress against pollution

By Ted Smith

TEN YEARS ago, a small story appeared in the San Jose Mercury News that would eventually lead to the transformation of the clean image of Silicon Valley's industry. In the process, the consciousness of area residents was forever altered.

On Jan. 20, 1982, reporter Susan Yoachim wrote about a leaking underground storage tank at the Fairchild Semiconductor plant in South San Jose that had contaminated a major drinking water well with high concentrations of 1,1,1-trichloroethane, a toxic industrial cleaning solvent.

At the time, few realized that this spill would be the environmental wake-up call for Silicon Valley and other high-tech meccas of this new "clean" industry.

Before the 1982 Fairchild incident, few people outside the electronics industry were aware of its toxic underbelly.

Self-proclaimed as the "clean industry," it promoted its image during the early years as one of providing good, safe jobs and revolutionizing our lives. Few people paid much attention when early health and safety activists at the Santa Clara Center on Occupational Safety and Health documented the toxic hazards and identified electronics workers who were getting sick on the job from exposure to chemicals.

Danger in the kitchen tap

But when the Fairchild spill contaminated drinking water, the situation changed dramatically. Suddenly, the hazards were no longer merely a problem for production workers. The danger was lurking right in the kitchen tap. And people began to wonder if the Fairchild leak was an isolated incident.

It was not. After the Fairchild spill, the Regional Water Quality Control Board undertook a leak detection program. The board found that an astounding 85 percent of the targeted underground tanks at businesses throughout the county were leaking.

Today, the water quality board is monitoring more than 150 toxic leaks in the county. Twenty-nine of these are so serious that the federal Environmental Protection Agency has put them on the Superfund cleanup list as among the most polluted in the country, giving Santa Clara County the dubious distinction of having the more such sites than anywhere else in the nation.

Additionally:

- More than 10,000 fuel leaks have been detected in the county.
- More than 50 public drinking water wells serving 100,000 people have been contaminated, as have more than 200 private wells.
- Almost 100 toxic chemicals have been detected at the various spill sites, including a witches brew of carcinogens, reproductive toxins and neurotoxins, most of which are industrial solvents.

While cleanup has started at most of these sites, none is complete, and the EPA has estimated that one, a joint Raytheon-Fairchild-Intel plume in Mountain View, will take up to 300 years to clean.

One of the most important lessons of

the Fairchild spill is that we no longer take our drinking water for granted. Indeed, a poll undertaken by the Santa Clara Valley Water District found that more than half the residents were so concerned that they bought bottled water or had water filters.

New awareness

Awareness raised by the groundwater contamination spilled over into other areas of environmental concerns. New reporting laws led to the discovery that dozens of companies, including the lead-

to a new environmental consciousness. As residents' attitudes have changed, politicians and industry leaders have begun to respond.

We have all learned that the cost of doing business without regard for environmental consequences has become prohibitive in terms of both dollars and reputation. The cost of cleanup has become so enormous that industry leaders are learning that prevention pays, even if it means having to overcome short-term financial pressures.

Remarkably, in an era dominated by an anti-regulatory and anti-tax sentiment, many new environmental regulations have been enacted, and significant funds, both public and private, have been earmarked for improvements. Prevailing attitudes have changed from denial to a focus on cleanup, to an emerging focus on pollution prevention.

Local governments in the Bay Area, responding to the concerns of their constituents, have been in the forefront in developing important new legislation, much of which has served as a model for state and national regulations.

One of the most important legislative results of the Fairchild leak was the enactment in 1983 of the first hazardous materials storage ordinance in the county, which strictly regulated chemical storage, especially underground. The ordinance included a pioneering public right-to-know provision that helped to bring down the walls of toxic secrecy.

A state legislative initiative by Assemblyman Byron Sher in 1984 led to a similar victory, and this was duplicated in 1986 at the federal level with help from Rep. Norm Mineta.

Other significant legislative victories have included the enactment of the first Toxic Gas Model Ordinance in the nation, and innovative legislation by both San Jose and the county to reduce chlorofluorocarbon discharges. Also, under pressure from water quality officials and environmental activists, Silicon Valley cities have begun far-reaching programs to reduce toxic discharges into their sewer systems. The local track record during the last decade is impressive.

Stringent standards

Hundreds of underground solvent and fuel tanks have been replaced as part of the prevention program. Stringent cleanup standards have been developed to protect and restore the aquifer resources. Public pressure stemming from the realization that air pollution amounted to millions of pounds annually has led to the drastic reduction of toxic air emissions. Open air burning of rocket fuel is being phased out.

In short, people have organized in their neighborhoods, workplaces and schools in an outbreak of environmental democracy. Innovative governmental programs — such as San Jose's Office of Environmental Management and the county's Hazardous Waste Planning Pro-

gram — are now promoting environmental awareness and initiatives as never before.

Ambitious programs are in place:

- Household hazardous waste collection and curbside recycling are widespread.
- Storm sewers have stenciled warnings to protect the bay.
- Cleaner mass transit through the light rail system is finally under way.

Many companies have learned that good environmental and occupational health and safety programs are good for business, especially when they are an important factor in recruiting and retaining dedicated employees.

The progress that followed the failure of the Fairchild tank has been significant, but much of it has still only scratched the surface. The great challenge as we approach the next century is to establish a workable plan for sustainable development. While it is true that ecology and economy have the same root, the two concepts are often viewed as intractable enemies. If we are to survive and thrive as a region — and in fact as a planet — we must make peace between ecology and the economy.

The end of the Cold War provides a great opportunity to develop bold and innovative long-term solutions. What we really need is a "Marshall Plan" for sound economic and environmental development.

We need an industrial policy that can help pull us out of a deep recession during a time of military cutbacks, rather than by relying on military spending, which has been the panacea of the past. The innovative nature of high-tech industry makes it well-suited to provide the leadership necessary to make the transition to a sustainable future, one that is based on a vision of global needs.

Problems ahead

Many immediate problems lie ahead. We must develop forums for debating and deciding questions of technological change, which too often has outstripped our ability to understand its consequences.

As the economy deteriorates, there are increasing pressures to relax hard won environmental standards in the interest of short-term economic gain.

There is a danger that the innovative spirit demonstrated by local residents and their governments in developing environmental solutions will be swallowed up by the drive to pre-empt local control. Some of the current proposals for regional government, as well as sections of proposed international trade agreements such as GATT and the U.S.-Mexico Free Trade Agreement would override local initiatives and prohibit the enactment of innovative local solutions.

We must find a way to address the global nature of the environmental crisis while preserving and encouraging the development of local solutions. The lessons of the last decade could help us to find the way to a sustainable future. If not, we are destined to suffocate in our own waste.

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