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After 10 years, toxic site still not cleaned

Contaminated water around Moffett Field could pose threat to Bay wetlands

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SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

MOUNTAIN VIEW — Ten years after toxic ground water was discovered beneath a strip of land shared by the Navy, NASA and private electronics makers, the cleanup has yet to begin.

And the underground "plume" of chlorinated solvents, which have been linked to birth defects and cancer, may be moving north into the wetlands on the edge of the San Francisco Bay, according to environmentalists and the Navy. The plume is now estimated to measure 1½ miles long and a half-mile wide.

Most of the trichlorethane, trichlorethylene and perchlorethane leaked out of underground holding tanks between 1950 and 1980. Fire ordinances at the time required that the solvents be stored underground.

Other toxic substances were dumped by manufacturers before the practice was outlawed.

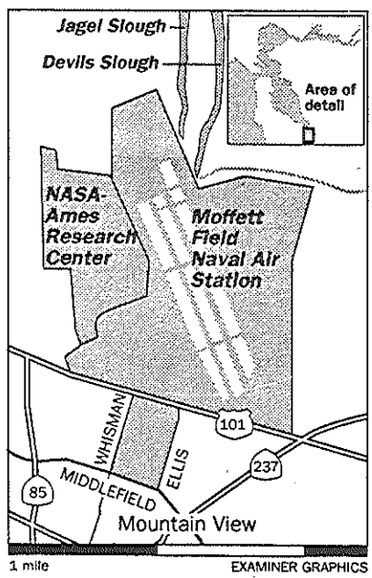
The Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition has been pushing the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the Navy and the private companies to clean up the plume since 1984.

But legal complexities and squabbling among the polluters have delayed the process, and the cleanup is now expected to begin late in 1993 at the earliest.

$50 million to clean each site

The contaminated area is divided into two separate sites, both on the federal Superfund list established to clean up the nation's worst toxic zones. Each site is expected to cost at least $50 million to clean when the effort finally begins.

The U.S. Naval Air Station at Moffett Field, where fuels, solvents, PCBs and heavy minerals have contaminated the upper aquifer, lies north of U.S. 101.



It's adjoined by the NASA-Ames Research Center, which also sits atop contaminated ground water. Since the contamination originated at Moffett and circulated to the NASA-Ames site, the Navy is coordinating the cleanup there.

Seven companies — Intel, Raytheon, Fairchild Instruments, Union Carbide Chemicals Co., General Instrument Corp., NEC Electronics and Spectrace Inc., formerly Tracor X-Ray Inc. — contaminated the land on the south side of 101.

In April, the EPA settled with Raytheon and Intel, which agreed to share 35 percent of the responsibility for the site. The EPA then hit the remaining companies' current and past owners, who had passed up a chance to negotiate, with a federal order locking them into responsibility for the remaining 65 percent of the cleanup, according to EPA attorney Thomas Mintz.

"They can all countersue each other in private actions," he said. "They are either countersuing or negotiating with each other now."

Critics say the EPA waited a long time before taking that action, which is built into the Superfund Act. And they say the EPA has a bigger hammer that it could have used already but hasn't.

"The EPA has the most powerful legal weapon — triple the damages if the (polluters) are not doing what the EPA wants — and they haven't used it," said Ted Smith of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition. "They could have pushed the companies and the Navy to clean up years ago."

The companies are preparing plans for their individual cleanup efforts. The plans are expected to be submitted to the EPA this fall. No timetable has been set.

But the companies complain that while they are taking steps to control the plume and plan the cleanup, the Navy is still identifying how far the contamination has spread.

"Unless we know where the Navy sources are, anything at Moffett could be drawn back into our cleanup area and recontaminate it," Fairchild spokesman Bill Strawn said. "The cleanup has been made a lot more complicated by the separate set of rules for the Navy."

"There is some truth that the Navy stuff can slightly recontaminate their cleanup," agreed Jim Haas, the Navy's environmental coordinator for Moffett Field. "We will start putting in wells (to isolate contaminated water) to control the plume at the south end of our site this summer."

Navy to create smaller parts

And under pressure from the EPA and the coalition, the Navy also has agreed to break its huge cleanup area into smaller parts so the operation can get started sooner — possibly by late 1993.

Cleanup involves pumping up ground water, and either removing the solvents or breaking them down into harmless byproducts. The water is then pumped back into the ground.

It isn't known how long it will take to clean the plume in Mountain View, but the cleanup of similar contamination at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory is expected to take about 30 years.

Meantime, the plume has no controls to keep it from moving north, toward the wetlands and the Bay, according to the EPA's Roberta Blank, who is in charge of the north site. "We're looking at intercepting the plume with hydraulic controls now, but it's not in the existing schedule."