

BUSINESS

High-tech growth draining too much water, groups warn

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As the computer industry expands from Silicon Valley into the Southwest — to places like Phoenix, Albuquerque and Austin — it is bringing a huge thirst for water and threats of toxic pollution, a coalition of environmental groups charged Friday.

At a mid-afternoon news conference at Plaza de Cesar Chavez, four activist groups from Arizona, Texas and New Mexico joined San Jose's Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition in a call for more accountability from high-tech executives, noting that the industry's early years

Santa Clara County with 29 Superfund sites, more than any other county in the United States.

"The irony is that this is an industry which is at the cutting edge of innovation and technology," said Carlos Plazola, a program coordinator with the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition. "But the industry is proving to be one of the most unsustainable industries of all."

Questions quickly arose, however, about whether the groups were overestimating the threats based on incidents which occurred

Groups decry tech impact

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decades ago.

Government regulators, water managers and a representative from Intel — one company singled out for criticism — said much of the groups' criticisms are misplaced.

"The industries here are clean now," said Lee Esquibel, director of the Santa Clara County Department of Environmental Health. "They are a part of the game compared with other industries."

In 1989, for example, all industry in Santa Clara County pumped 5.7 million pounds of toxic chemicals into air, water and land, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. By 1994, that number had fallen more than 80 percent to 1.1 million pounds.

Nearly all of the Superfund sites in Santa Clara County related to high tech were caused when chemical solvents used to clean circuit boards and other components leaked from underground storage tanks in the 1960s and '70s into groundwater. Increasingly strict federal, state and local laws forced the companies to begin cleanups, which continue to this day.

"The companies have been very responsible," said Keiti Takata, director of the Superfund division at EPA's San Francisco office. "The cost of cleanup and the liability issues have been so severe, it's been a wonderful deterrent."

Several of the environmentalists noted that new high-tech companies are using millions of gallons of water a day in desert areas, putting stress on resources even as local governments sell water to them at low-rate prices and lure them with tax breaks.

In Rio Rancho, a suburb of Albuquerque, Intel pays only 41 cents an average for every 1,000 gallons of water it uses, even while it uses 4 million gallons a day, the groups charged. Average homeowners in the area pay \$1.75 per 1,000 gallons.

As she burned a piece of sage and held up a jar of water from a ditch that has flowed near her New Mexican home since "before this continent was invaded by Europeans," Sylvia Ledesma of the Southwest Network for Environmental & Economic Justice said that Intel and others are taking too much water.

Water officials there disagreed. "People watering down drive-ways and ornamental landscaping

is more of a problem here than high-tech companies," said Doug Bennett, irrigation conservation director for the Albuquerque Public Works Department.

He noted that industry uses only 3 percent of the water in Albuquerque. Even in the wider region, high-tech companies use only a fraction of the water that homeowners and golf courses use, Bennett said.

The same is true throughout the west, according to state statistics. In California and Arizona, farmers use 80 percent of the water. In Texas, agriculture consumes 68 percent, while all industry combined uses 11 percent and homeowners

20 percent.

"If you're going to try to build an economic base is there an industry that's better for the economy or the environment than the high technology industry?" said Intel's Howard High. "I haven't found it yet."

Chip fabricating plants like Intel's in Phoenix and Albuquerque are environmentally friendlier than other rural industries such as mining and corporate agriculture, he added.

"These plants bring economic growth and high-paying jobs," High said. "Communities all over the world are clamoring to attract semiconductor companies."