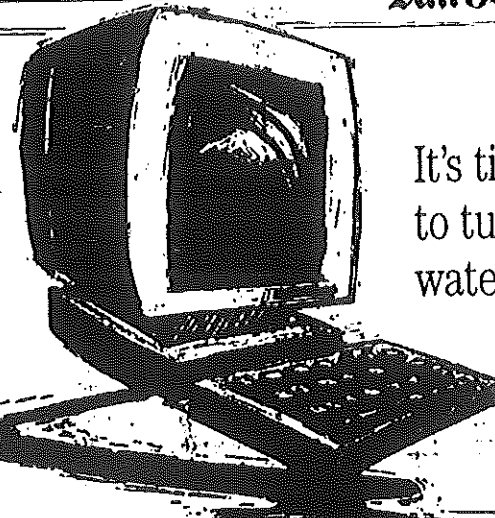


Toxic tech



It's time for Silicon Valley's high-tech leaders to turn off the faucet and implement closed-loop water recycling. The challenge is for the industry to embrace its environmental responsibilities and develop and export solutions as aggressively as it sells new products.

BY TED SMITH

MANY OF US can't imagine life before the personal computer. Yet in addition to its many benefits, the electronics revolution has gravely affected many communities where computer manufacturing is based.

This sobering message was recently brought back to Silicon Valley, the birthplace of the semiconductor industry, by residents from communities throughout the Southwest who are facing serious water pollution and water supply depletion as a result of high-tech expansion.

These community members, affiliated with the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice and the Campaign for Responsible Technology, all contributed to a new report, "Sacred Waters: Life-Blood of Mother Earth," which documents high tech's legacy in the Southwest and Silicon Valley. The report also points to solutions waiting for acceptance and implementation at industry's doorstep.

Among its findings: Santa Clara County is home to more toxic Superfund sites — 29 — than any other county in the United States. Eighty percent of these were caused by electronics manufacturing and related industries. Another major concern is that Silicon Valley companies discharge millions of gallons of wastewater per day into San Francisco Bay. While toxics in groundwater and bay pollution may not be news to us, what is news is that high-tech companies have exported these problems elsewhere.

People throughout the Southwest are now asserting that solutions to high tech's unquenchable thirst and environmental record must also come from our innovative region. In New Mexico's "Silicon Mesa," Intel uses about 4 million gallons of water per day. The chip giant pays, on average, 41 cents per every 1,000 gallons of water — four times less than residential users.

This flagrant example of corporate welfare is on top of the \$250 million in tax incentives and an \$8 billion revenue bond Intel received for its plant in Rio Rancho.

In Arizona's "Silicon Desert," approximately 25 percent of Phoenix's groundwater is contaminated with toxics coming from Motorola and other high-tech companies. The resulting 15-mile-long toxic plume may cost as much as \$800 million to remove, but cleanup efforts have been glacially slow as companies responsible for the pollution resort to legal maneuvers to resist paying for cleanup and health costs.

In the "Silicon Hills" of Texas, water consumption by high-tech industry has tripled in the past three years. The industry lobbied the Austin City Council to impose a rate change to reduce industrial water rates to less than two-thirds what residents pay.

As in other communities, these firms are enticed by generous tax breaks, including a recent \$125 million package for Samsung.

If an industry can design spacecraft capable of roaming distant planets, it should also be capable of developing environmentally sustainable manufacturing practices. Closed-loop (zero discharge) industrial re-use of treated wastewater and toxics reduction planning are solutions that can help build a sustainable 21st century in high-tech manufacturing.

Workshops in Silicon Valley have showcased companies such as Watkins-Johnson and Silicon Valley Circuits that have already incorporated this cost-effective technology, and some other companies are currently exploring dramatic water re-use opportunities.

Unfortunately, too many industry giants claim the costs for these environmental solutions are beyond their reach. Yet, as their quarterly profits hit unprecedented highs again, this excuse is disingenuous.

Instead, some companies are proposing "solutions" such as re-injecting wastewater into aquifers, claiming that the water is unfit for industrial re-use because it isn't clean enough — but that it is acceptable for drinking!

It's time for Silicon Valley's high-tech leaders to turn off the faucet and implement closed-loop water recycling. The challenge is for the industry to embrace its environmental responsibilities and develop and export solutions as aggressively as it sells new products.

Silicon Valley residents should be proud of the advances our computer companies brought to the world. Let's put the celebration on hold, however, until these high-tech giants put the health of communities and the environment above the bottom line.

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