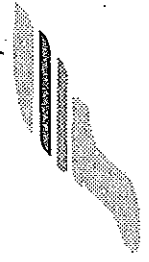


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Editorials

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Progress on toxics

THE Industry Clean Water Task Force was formed last fall to help in brightening the badly tarnished environmental image of Silicon Valley's high-technology industry. Its latest report reaffirms that industry has made real progress toward assuring that no further chemical leaks will occur. But of course, that leaves the problem of those leaks that already have occurred. Earlier this year the Regional Water Quality Control Board distributed a report ranking the severity of 75 ground-water spill sites in Santa Clara County. The task force surveyed the companies at those sites to find what steps have been taken since January 1982.

"Of the 332 tank systems in place in 1982," the survey reported, "192 have been removed or closed, with the 140 systems remaining in active service subject to regular routine monitoring." Any new tanks have two linings and monitors, so leaks are detected and trapped before they can spread. Some small risk of contamination is inescapable, but industry has taken strong steps to prevent future leaks.

At these sites alone, industry has spent nearly \$70 million to search for and clean up past leaks, but the overall record is nonetheless mixed. Generally, industry has shown willingness to do whatever enforcement agencies have requested, but because of understaffing on the water board, lack of clear

health standards for chemical contamination, and having to create procedures for each case, the water board and other enforcement agencies have not always driven the cleanup process as quickly as technically possible.

Progress has been made. But only half the sites are now removing contaminated soil and only a quarter are treating ground water, according to Ted Smith of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition.

Outsiders will always have a hard time judging the effectiveness of the industry task force. When it was set up by the American Electronics Association, the Semiconductor Industry Association and the Santa Clara County Manufacturing Group, the goal was to exchange information on how spills occurred and techniques for cleaning them up and preventing them from recurring.

Voluntary exchange of information is useful, but it goes on behind closed doors. Statistical releases such as the recent report provide aggregated information, rather than identifying which companies have done how much.

Industry deserves credit for the steps it has taken to protect the environment. That credit will increase if and when the task force or another industry group begins to publicly identify and prod those few laggard companies who have not yet reached a higher level of environmental consciousness.