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# GLOBAL ELECTRONICS INFORMATION NEWSLETTER

Number 19

February, 1982

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## TOXIC LEAKS

Silicon Valley's electronics industry has finally lost its undeserved reputation as a clean, light industry. When residents in a South San Jose neighborhood near a Fairchild Semiconductor plant heard this January that a toxic solvent from the plant had leaked into their water supply, they quickly associated the exposure with what appeared to be a cluster of birth defects on babies born of women living in the neighborhood. Authorities are still studying possible links, and given the numerous materials in our environment which can increase the risk of birth defects, it may be impossible to prove that the trichloroethane (TCA) was the cause. But the story caused an outcry which has opened up a Pandora's box of previously unreported problems.

Shortly thereafter, officials closed a private well in Mountain View, in the heart of Silicon Valley, after it was discovered to be contaminated with the more toxic relative of TCA, trichloroethylene (TCE), also apparently from an industrial leak.

It turns out, reports the Regional Water Quality Control Board, that a large number of electronics companies store toxic chemicals in underground tanks. Several companies, including Intel, Fairchild, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, and Micro Metalics (a recycling firm that

serves the electronics industry) have accidentally released toxic chemicals into the environment. Subsequent to that report, Signetics, concerned by the reports of leaks elsewhere, discovered a major leak of TCE at its Sunnyvale facility. Ironically, most of the spills have been detected at large companies, generally believed to be more environmentally responsible than smaller firms.

Public officials are now calling for increased testing of water in Silicon Valley. Industry spokesmen profess concern over the problem as well, and they are proposing changes in the Uniform Building Code to prevent such leaks in the future.