Public Interest Group Initiatives at the Local Level

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ABSTRACT

In August 1988, the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition was the first group in the United States to compile and publicly release data from the new Toxics Release Inventory. The data — which documented millions of pounds of toxics released into the environment by the largest and most famous Silicon Valley electronics giants — were reported by the media throughout California and the United States. This coalition urged the self-described "clean industry" to drastically reduce its chemical use and emissions (particularly the CFC 113 discharges that proved to be the largest in the nation). Since then, and after other significant national media attention, the high-tech industry has significantly reduced its reliance on CFCs. In addition, the Santa Clara County Manufacturers Group — the local trade association for the Silicon Valley industry — began publishing an annual report in 1989 that documents its annual emissions as reported under TRI.

Production of synthetic chemicals in the United States, which became a significant industry in 1918, has expanded enormously since World War II. Figure 1 graphically depicts this escalation and highlights industrial usages of synthetic chemicals, including high-tech electronics.

Until rather recently, most people in the United States and throughout the world thought that the electronics industry was not part of the toxics release problem — that it was, as self-described, a "clean" industry. However, over the past decade we have learned that the "clean" industry was in fact highly polluting. More Superfund sites are located in California's Silicon Valley — a hotbed of high-tech industry — than anyplace else in the United States. (Superfund sites are so polluted that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has put them on a priority list for cleanup.) Groundwater pollution at 29 of these sites directly stems from the use and misuse of solvents used in high-tech industry.

In addition, a high incidence of air pollution and ozone depletion from these industries, as well as occupational health hazards, has been noted. Occupation-caused disease among semiconductor workers is about three times that of the national manufacturing average.

Introducing Right-to-Know in Silicon Valley

In response to this situation, the Silicon Valley Toxics Coaltion produced a booklet, *The Legacy of High-Tech Development: The Toxic Life Cycle of Computer Manufacturing*, which states that the industry presents some significant problems. We were able to determine this through the development of the right-to-know movement in the United States, of which the Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) is but one aspect.

You might think that right-to-know legislation was introduced without difficulty. In fact, it has a rich history of struggle in the United States dating back to the 1970s when, coming out of the labor movement, the concept of worker right-to-know was introduced in the first attempt to pry