

## **CYANIDE INCIDENT**

### **November 1995**

In November 1995, the cyanide in the Regional Water Quality Control Plant's (RWQCP) discharge to San Francisco Bay increased dramatically from typical values of 3 to 4 parts per billion (ppb) to as high as 40 ppb (see chart on reverse side). Trunk line sampling revealed that the source was in East Palo Alto. The East Palo Alto trunk line values were as high as 744 ppb as compared to 0 to 5 ppb in the other trunk lines. The problem was traced to a solvent recycler and hazardous waste management facility, Romic Environmental Technologies Corporation (ROMIC). ROMIC's discharge was found to be as high as 36,000 ppb, high enough to account for the increase at the RWQCP given that the ROMIC flow is approximately 1/1,000<sup>th</sup> of the flow to the RWQCP.

On November 28, the RWQCP determined that ROMIC was the source of the cyanide and company officials immediately ceased all discharge to the sewer. The following day, the East Palo Alto Sanitary District issued a Cease and Desist Order formalizing the November 28 verbal directive.

ROMIC then began to treat the remaining cyanide bearing wastewater on its site utilizing its distillation towers. The condensed water was routed to holding tanks and tested for cyanide and other pollutants. On December 1, 1995 testing of the first batch of treated water was completed. Analysis by an independent certified laboratory and the RWQCP confirmed that the cyanide concentration was much less than the limit for discharge to the sewer. The East Palo Alto Sanitary District (EPASD) Board then approved an amendment to the Cease and Desist Order to allow the discharge of compliant water to the sewer.

Follow-up investigations determined that the facility had been accepting, processing, and discharging a waste containing ferricyanide. Violation of both ROMIC's and the RWQCP's total cyanide permit limits occurred. However, ferricyanides are relatively non-toxic and significant environmental impacts were not observed or anticipated.

The cyanide-containing waste that was the source of the problem was processed directly in ROMIC's bio-treatment unit without distillation. The amounts processed were consistent with the concentrations found at the RWQCP. This treatment process did not remove the ferricyanide and it appears to have passed through ROMIC's and the RWQCP's processes without significant removal. ROMIC has modified its screening and testing procedures, record keeping, and decision-making procedures to ensure that similar incidents will be avoided in the future. ROMIC has also discontinued accepting waste for direct processing in the bio-treatment unit.

Enforcement actions included penalty litigation, which was initiated in addition to the agreed-upon operational and administrative modifications. ROMIC reached a settlement of the enforcement lawsuit with EPASD in December 1996.