

State rock controversy enters new phase

Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee, 8-18-10

Last month, this column revealed that legislation to remove serpentine as California's state rock was more than the symbolic gesture it appeared to be.

Sponsored by an organization with close financial ties to law firms that specialize in asbestos liability lawsuits, Senate Bill 624 flatly declares that "serpentine contains the deadly mineral chrysotile asbestos, a known carcinogen, exposure to which increases the risk of the cancer mesothelioma (and) California has the highest rate of mesothelioma deaths in the nation."

Those words could bolster lawsuits by those exposed to serpentine, but they also raised the hackles of geologists who said they were untrue. One form of asbestos can sometimes be found in serpentine, they said, but does not pose a cancer threat.

The bill's history also was questionable. When Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, brought SB 624 before the Senate, it pertained to composting. But a day after Senate passage, its contents were stripped out and replaced by the state rock provisions – a technique commonly used to slip bills under the radar.

A few geologists got wind of the drive to condemn serpentine. The intense opposition in geologic circles resulted in the July 9 column, which touched off an intense debate that gained national (New York Times) and international (BBC) media attention.

Geologists and asbestos victim advocates tossed verbal grenades at each other for several weeks. Earlier this month, Jon Christensen – an environmental historian who runs the Bill Lane Center for the American West and is writing a book about serpentine – convened a meeting of the warring factions.

"As this debate exploded on the Internet and in the media over the past month, the arguments about serpentine have become mostly about things other than the rock itself," said Christensen, adding, "We shouldn't be surprised. Symbols, such as a state rock, mean different things to different people. What has been surprising is how powerful this symbol is to many people, and how strongly people feel about serpentine as a symbol."

Christensen could not broker an agreement, but this week, with the bill awaiting a vote on the Assembly floor, Romero stripped out the language condemning serpentine as a cancer threat and left only these words: "It is the intent of the Legislature to remove serpentine as the state rock and lithologic emblem."

But that minimalist passage raises another question: Why?

Serpentine is found almost nowhere else but California. It is renowned for its color, which makes it a logical state rock if, indeed, California needs a state rock. If it's the "intent of the Legislature" to remove it, what's the rationale for doing so?

It would appear that Romero is trying to save face. She got herself involved in something unseemly and is trying to avoid a complete retreat by dropping the bill.