

Serpentine politics

A spat in Sacramento over dethroning official state rock

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Among all the states, California was first to designate an official state rock, giving that distinction to serpentine in 1965. Evidently, we blew it. And it is now the center of a political ruckus in Sacramento.

Serpentine is a metamorphic rock that forms beneath the ocean and over the eons is pushed upward by colliding tectonic plates. It can be found throughout the state and is particularly abundant in the Sierra foothills where it was often associated with gold mineral deposits, giving it a significant role in Gold Rush history.

That history was one factor that led the Legislature in 1965 to pass a bill, signed by Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, declaring serpentine to be the official state rock and lithologic emblem.

Serpentine is a lovely rock, green and blue, sometimes used in jewelry. Its state designation was controversy-free until two years ago when Linda Reinstein, a Californian whose husband died of mesothelioma, started a campaign to end its reign as state rock.

Serpentine, it turns out, is a host rock for asbestos, whose fibers are a known carcinogen and exposure to which increases the risk of mesothelioma.

Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, took up the cause, saying the state should not give such a toxic rock official distinction.

Her bill passed the Senate 36-0 last year. But a coalition of geologists is fighting on behalf of the rock, arguing that serpentine by itself is harmless. Some even argue that it traps carbon dioxide, keeping that greenhouse gas from escaping into the atmosphere and adding to global warming.

But the "drop the rock" campaign moves forward. Romero's bill passed an Assembly committee in June and is awaiting an Assembly floor vote, probably on Monday.

This editorial board makes no recommendation. This rock is too hot to handle.