

# Caught Between The State Rock And A Hard Place

## *Lode Rockhounds Bristle At Bill To Demote Serpentine*

**Dana M. Nichols, Stockton Record, 8-2-10**

SAN ANDREAS -- The deep green of serpentine, California's state rock, is visible all over the Mother Lode in road cuts and creek bottoms. Rock hounds sometimes carve it to make book ends and school children study it.

So some folks here are dismayed at a California lawmaker's plan to strip serpentine of its state rock status.

"It's the state rock, so leave it alone," said Sue Reeves, a member of the Calaveras Gem and Mineral Society who lives at the north end of San Andreas near several sites where serpentine is plentiful.

According to Senate Bill 624, however, serpentine makes a poor role model for other rocks and is an affront to human sensibilities because it contains asbestos. Asbestos is a term that describes several minerals that can break into microscopic fibers and, when inhaled, cause lasting damage and even cancer in humans.

"This is a question of health and public awareness," said Democratic state Sen. Gloria Romero of Los Angeles, who proposed the bill. "We know that California has the highest rates of mesothelioma deaths in the nation and we don't think it's appropriate to be celebrating as the state rock something which contains asbestos."

That argument is not convincing to those who know the rock well.

"Are they going to change (state) flowers just because somebody doesn't like orange?" asked Reeves, referring to the color of the California poppy.

And then there's the question of unfair prejudice against chrysotile, the particular form of asbestos that is sometimes found as white intrusions in serpentine. The bill says serpentine always contains chrysotile asbestos, and that it is a deadly mineral.

Wrong and wrong again, say geologists and other experts on the mineral.

First, serpentine does not always contain chrysotile asbestos, said Russell Shoemaker, the owner of Stories in Stone, a shop in Angels Camp that sells gems and mineral samples. Second, it is fairly difficult to liberate the microscopic asbestos fibers of chrysotile asbestos, Shoemaker said.

"In that natural form, it does you no harm. It is only after it is processed that you have a problem with asbestos."

In contrast, amphibole asbestos is a form of the mineral that much more easily flakes into tiny fibers and is therefore much more dangerous.

Still, health experts debate the risks of asbestos, as do attorneys.

Asbestos litigation has been a major business for lawyers since the 1960s. Attorneys seeking clients with mesothelioma have become a fixture on late-night television advertisements in California.

Defendants and insurers have paid out more than \$70 billion in asbestos litigation since such lawsuits began,

according to a 2005 study by the nonpartisan RAND Institute for Civil Justice. The average jury award for a mesothelioma victim is around \$4 million.

Aides from Sen. Romero's office said language in the bill was developed in consultation with the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization, a California group with significant funding from law firms that specialize in asbestos litigation.

But Romero said she took the lead in crafting the bill and moving it forward.

"It's not a giveaway to the trial lawyers," she said.