

Stigma of the serpentine

Found in SBC, it's questioned as state rock with link to asbestos

Connor Ramey, Hollister Pinnacle, 8-20-10

Despite issues regarding the California state budget, the State Senate has spent time the past month debating the removal of serpentine as the state rock because of its ties to asbestos. The removal isn't official because the bill was amended by the State Assembly three weeks ago and now it's back to the Senate awaiting approval.

The ramifications of the Senate Bill 624 will be felt strongly in San Benito County, as Clear Creek Management Area has one the world's largest outcrop of naturally occurring asbestos from 31,000 acres of serpentine. Benitoite, one of the world's rare minerals, is found in the local serpentine outcropping.

Serpentine was declared the California state rock in 1965 because of the rock's importance to the state's economy. The rock symbolized the Gold Rush and it was mined for its asbestos, which was used in the industrial industry. But 10 years later the asbestos market was faltering and today, the rock is connected to mesothelioma, a rare cancer that forms on the lining of internal organs.

The Bureau of Land Management closed Clear Creek in 2008 from public use because the United States Environmental Protection Agency discovered high amounts of asbestos in the area.

BLM Hollister Manager Rick Cooper said that the BLM has no official stance on the Senate's effort and that its decision won't effect how the BLM manages the public land.

"I certainly don't think what they are doing will have an impact on our decision on how we manage Clear Creek into the future," Cooper said.

He was also surprised that the state would consider removing the rock's title, he said.

"As a citizen, I feel there are some other issues I would like my state government to deal with before this," he said.

Los Angeles Democratic Sen. Gloria Romero presented the bill to the Senate in May, under the explicit condition that the rock was part of the asbestos problem.

"This is a question of health and public awareness," Romero said ssain a statement last month.

The proposal came after the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization created a campaign to "Drop the Rock" in October 2009.

"In a united call for compassionate action, the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization fully supports the 'Drop the Rock' campaign to remove the official California state rock, serpentine, which is the host rock for asbestos," Chief Executive Officer Linda Reinstein said in a statement last month. "The tragic irony of this designation is that asbestos exposure can cause numerous respiratory diseases and cancers including lung cancer and mesothelioma."

The goal of the campaign is two-fold, to rid the state of a state rock and to show that serpentine is a focal point for asbestos, despite what some geologist say.

In San Benito County, the battles with the rock have raged on the last few years because of the closure of Clear Creek. The recreation area was closed in 2008 because the BLM listed the wear and tear of the rock as the cause for the high concentrations of asbestos.

That is the crux of the issue, said Daune Willahan, a geology professor at Gavilan College.

Willahan admitted that some serpentine does harvest asbestos materials but it only becomes dangerous once the rock is grounded up and tossed into the air. Therefore, the effort to remove the rock's state title might do more harm than good.

"People shouldn't be afraid of it," she said. "Leave it alone and just look at it."

Willahan is afraid that people will overreact when they find that serpentine might be in their house and resort to demolishing the rock - which would release the potentially harmful material. Instead of disturbing the rock, it should be sealed and left alone.

Instead of issuing a title change, politicians should have stuck with educating people on the rock's possible dangers, she said.

"They have good intentions but at the same time they didn't do some basic research - it would have saved them some time," Willahan said.

Willahan believed it was wasted time - comparing the title removal to the state removing the grizzly bear from the state flag.

"It's that mindset that could do some harm," she said.

The harm is that the rock, by nature, isn't dangerous and the removal of the state rock title creates a dangerous stigma toward the rock.

Cooper thought it was important to inform people of both the danger and benefits of the rock.

"The value of awareness that serpentine, but not all serpentine, can have asbestos or asbestos forms in it is important," he said. "But they also need to know that there are forms of serpentine that does not have asbestos. Maybe people will be more cautious around it."