

State stones will break your bones ...

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The midsummer political doldrums often generate a series of inanities and silly tempests, nonstories that can keep the talk-show hosts in full rant.

This year's silliness is the quarry quarrel arising from serpentine, the ubiquitous rock of this age, the stone that can be found in 42 of California's 58 counties, the metamorphic phenomena that has long boasted proudly of its status as the state rock.

We knew, of course, that the golden poppy is the state flower, that western swing is the state dance and that the California dogface butterfly is the state insect.

But it wasn't until recently that most of us learned that California once bothered to name a state rock — and that several politicians now vigorously oppose serpentine.

The honor was bestowed on the shiny, smooth stone back in 1965, a kinder and gentler era of California history, back when the Legislature somehow managed to show bipartisan support on issues of vital concern to citizens of the state.

Now, state Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, has introduced legislation to "drop the rock" because it turns out that serpentine has the unmitigated gall to contain traces of asbestos.

Asbestos is no laughing matter, of course. Exposure to asbestos can cause mesothelioma, a form of cancer that kills about 2,500 Americans annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"This is a question of health and public awareness," Romero recently told the Associated Press.

"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."

Even then, Romero seemed to be somewhat ashamed at what she was proposing. Her bill, SB 624, originally addressed the membership of garbage disposal district boards and it cleared the state Senate as a bill to define "anaerobic digestion."

But when it reached the Assembly, it was rewritten to be more specific about serpentine, the killer rock.

The bill now sits on the Assembly floor, like a hard consolidated mineral matter, generating howls of protest from all quarters. Tort reform advocates hate the bill because they think it will open the door to more asbestos litigation. Rock hounds and geologists believe that serpentine is getting a bad rap, that it is no less dangerous than scores of other native California rocks that contain asbestos.

We welcome the full debate on the issue — just as soon as the state can resolve more pressing issues. Like, for instance, its \$19 billion deficit.