

California May Drop Its Official State Rock

Jennifer Steinhauer, New York Times, 7-13-10

LOS ANGELES — Empirically speaking, geologists are not a particularly irascible group. But those who make their living studying rocks, minerals and gems in California — and increasingly those scientists beyond the state's borders — are enraged over a bill in Sacramento that would knock serpentine, the official state rock, off its mantle.

The lawmaker and others who would like to see serpentine stripped of its title say the olive green rock found all over the state is a grim symbol of the deadly cancers associated with asbestos, which can be found in the rock. Geologists, who have taken to Twitter on behalf of the rock, assert that serpentine is harmless and is being demonized by advocates for people with asbestos-related diseases and possibly their trial lawyers, too.

The bill to defrock the rock — which recently passed the full State Senate and is awaiting a vote in the Assembly — is sponsored by Senator Gloria Romero, a Los Angeles Democrat, with the strong support of the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization.

Declaring that serpentine “has known health effects,” the bill would leave California — one of roughly half the states in the nation with an official rock or mineral — without an official rock. (According to the bill, California was the first state, in 1965, to name an official rock.) Asbestos occurs naturally in many minerals, and indeed some serpentine rocks do serve as a host for chrysotile, a form of asbestos. But geologists say chrysotile is less harmful than some other forms of asbestos, and would be a danger — like scores of other rocks — only if a person were to breathe its dust repeatedly.

“There is no way anyone is going to get bothered by casual exposure to that kind of rock,” said Malcolm Ross, a geologist who retired from the United States Geological Survey in 1995. “Unless they were breaking it up with a sledgehammer year after year.”

Dr. Ross and other opponents of the bill are concerned that removing serpentine, which is occasionally used in jewelry, as the state's rock would demonize it and thus inspire litigation against museums, property owners and other sites where the rocks sit; they cite the inclusion of a letter of support from the Consumer Attorneys of California with the bill as evidence.

“If they keep the asbestos issue bubbling,” Dr. Ross said, “it means money for politicians, more money for lawyers and money for scientists to investigate.”

J. D. Preston, a spokesman from the consumer lawyers group, said the group had nothing to do with drafting the legislation and was just responding to a request from the awareness organization for a support letter. “We just thought this was a good fit in our mission of consumer safety,” Mr. Preston said. “It is certainly not the intent, and we don't even see where it opens the avenue for litigation.”

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has indicated no position.

Linda Reinstein, president of the awareness organization, whose husband died of lung cancer, pointed out that the bill had numerous letters of support, including ones from the Childrens Hospital Los Angeles and groups that represent people with mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of many internal organs associated with asbestos.

“It doesn’t do anything legally,” Ms. Reinstein said of the proposed legislation. “This bill is all about education and awareness. We never expected such a stir.”

Under the hashtag — a Twitter identifying phrase that allows easy searching of similarly themed messages — #CASerpentine, scientists and other opponents of the bill are debating the bill’s merits and offering fighting words. One read, “Dear gloria romero, you have picked the wrong nerds to mess with!”

Senator Romero said she didn't believe it was appropriate for California to have a state rock that is linked to asbestos. "California is health conscious," she said. "This is not about being anti-rock. But why do we need a rock?"