

Should California's state rock be stripped of its title because it contains asbestos?

Jessie Schiewe, Los Angeles Times, 7-2-10

Imagine yourself in an Old West film, standing in the middle of a deserted street flanked with saloons, hotels and brothels, the soundtrack from "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" wailing strong. At first you think you are alone with the tumbleweeds -- but then you see two figures facing down.

On the left is Sen. Gloria Romero (D-East Los Angeles), suited up in leather chaps and a cowboy hat -- and on the right, the state rock of California -- serpentine.

Until recently, most people probably didn't know that there *was* a state rock -- far less that Romero wants to get rid of it.

Senate Bill 624, which has been passed by the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources but still has a long way to go in the Legislature, would strip serpentine of its state-rock title, held since 1965. Why? Because the rock "contains the deadly mineral chrysotile asbestos, a known carcinogen, exposure to which increases the risk of the cancer mesothelioma" and because "California should not designate a rock known to be toxic to the health of its residents as the state's official rock."

If you don't know what serpentine looks like, it looks like, well ... a rock. Shiny and smooth, it is typically green in color but can also be yellow, brown, gray or reddish brown. In natural environments, it can occur as large rock masses, but it also is commonly used for ornamental purposes in the form of cut and polished stone.

Chosen as the state rock as a symbol of California's mining prowess, serpentine was also the first rock in any state to be given this title.

Asbestos, a known carcinogen, poses health risks when small particles and mineral dust are inhaled, the fibers then lodging themselves in the membrane of the lungs. Mesothelioma, the most serious asbestos-caused condition, is a highly aggressive cancer. California has the highest rate of mesothelioma deaths in the nation, a fact that SB 624 also notes.

So, how concerned should Californians be about their potentially carcinogenic state rock?

Not very, says John Rosenfeld, emeritus professor of geology at UCLA. According to Rosenfeld, SB 624 "is a bunch of bull." (This newspaper's editorial page also doesn't think much of this bid to change California's state rock, though it notes that some people with mesothelioma have taken up the cause.)

Of course, Rosenfeld said in an interview, people working with asbestos should wear masks and protect themselves from the mineral dust. But he goes on to explain that there are different types of asbestos, some of which are harmful, and others not. The green asbestos, chrysotile, is the least dangerous type, he says -- and, fortunately, the most common type of asbestos found in California serpentine.

"Serpentine is a very beautiful rock. Holding the rock is not a problem and it's nothing you should be concerned about," he said. "It's part of the history of California, noticed by the early settlers of this state. It's a beautiful stone and shouldn't be removed."

If we're going to get rid of serpentine, do we have to get rid of our state gemstone, benitoite, found with it? And

what should we have as our state rock instead? (Quartz? Maybe not -- the dust, when inhaled, can cause a condition called silicosis.) Or do we even need to find a replacement for it? After all, we still have our state mineral, gold, to stand proudly behind.