

California's state rock raked over the coals

S. Howard Bransford, KALWnews.com (San Francisco radio), 6-24-10

California's official state symbols tell a story of a place of natural wealth and pioneering spirit, not to mention exploitable natural resources.

For example, there's the redwood tree—a reminder of rugged coastlines and peaceful mountains. Then there's the state mineral, gold, which tells of the hardy miners of the past. But what's the meaning behind serpentine, the state rock? In 1965, leaders chose this mineral-packed stone as a symbol for the state's mining prowess.

"We were the first state to have a state rock," said State Geologist John Parish. "California leads the way."

But now some activists are saying that designation was a mistake. So what's not to like about shiny green serpentine? Well, it turns out that one of the minerals in the rock is asbestos, which has been blamed for causing mesothelioma, a form of lung cancer.

That makes serpentine not just a rock, but rather a political hot potato. When serpentine gets broken up—for example during construction or excavation—asbestos particles can go into the air and become a health hazard.

Some people say it can be just as hazardous when Californians love serpentine as much as they love West Coast swing dancing, the official state dance, or the grizzly bear, the official state animal.

Enter State Senator Gloria Romero, (Dem-East LA). She took the carcinogenic matter into her own hands by introducing Senate Bill 624, which would take away serpentine's title. On Monday, the bill received unanimous approval from the State Assembly's Natural Resources Committee.

Romero and her staffers say the bill will remind Californians that asbestos—and by extension serpentine—is a bona fide health hazard.

"I think it's an awareness issue," said Teala Schaff, a spokesperson for Romero. "If the state can have a hand in keeping people healthy, that's a positive."

So how did serpentine become California's pet rock in the first place? Parish, the state's geologist, explained in a phone interview that one of its core minerals—asbestos—wasn't always considered a toxin. For years, it was prized for its heat-resistant qualities and widely used in construction and shipbuilding.

In short, not many people were talking about asbestos in 1965, when serpentine won its title.

"Forty-five years ago, asbestos was a very valuable commercial mineral," Parish said.

That changed in the 1980s, when awareness of the health risks from asbestos began to grow. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency largely phased out its use, but California's state rock designation stuck.

Linda Reinstein, CEO and co-founder of the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization, said leaders were too slow to recognize the irony. Reinstein's husband died of mesothelioma in 2003, and she now works to promote awareness of asbestos hazards.

Among cancers, mesothelioma is relatively rare, but some 2,000 to 3,000 new cases are diagnosed each year, according to the American Lung Association. The Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization estimates that 10,000 Americans die every year from asbestos-related diseases.

That makes California's state rock designation an insult to victims of asbestos illnesses, said Reinstein.

"This became more than a laughing matter," said Reinstein. "This is really a health issue."

So how prevalent is serpentine? And how might it contribute to asbestos-related health concerns? Gennette Paauwe of the California Air Resources Board said serpentine is prevalent in upland areas throughout the state, such as the Sierra Nevada Foothills and the Pacific Coast Range. Coincidentally, those places are also hot spots for new home construction, Paauwe said, meaning it's more likely that the serpentine will be disturbed and broken up into asbestos.

"As California's been going through a building boom over the last 20 to 30 years, the rock, in certain parts of the state, is in regions that are being built that are being disturbed," Paauwe said.

Activists like Reinstein say that's more than enough reason to take serpentine off its pedestal.

"We don't need a rock," Reinstein said. "We have a mineral, which is gold."

Reinstein said Romero's bill has bipartisan support and no vocal opponents. So while the desert tortoise, California's state reptile, can crawl proudly across the sand, and the California Gray Whale can swim the seas with dignity, it looks like serpentine is no Rock of Ages.