

Mining law must change

Santa Maria Times, 4-24-11

Members of Congress are in the midst of their Easter break. Here's a suggestion for when they get back to work — fix America's ancient mining laws.

Federal law approved by Congress 139 years ago allows large mining companies to claim rights to operations on federal lands, without any competitive bidding. More importantly, the companies can

extract what resources they can — without paying any royalties.

In other words, that 1872 law allows corporations to invade public land, strip it bare, leaving taxpayers holding an essentially empty asset. To make matters worse, some of these operations leave behind a toxic mess, the cleanup costs of which are, for the most part, paid with public funds.

There have been periods of our history during which the law had no real effect on the average American. Now is not one of those eras. Mining claims on public lands — including in some of our most treasured parks and wilderness areas — are spiking, due to global demand.

And because the law gives companies a green light to do as they please, places like the Grand Canyon, Mt. Rushmore and the Joshua Tree National Park could soon be littered with mining operations.

Some members of Congress don't want the old law revised, preferring instead to protect the industries that help finance their re-election campaigns.

That is outrageous. The law should be rewritten to require competitive bidding, and adding royalty payments to mining claim requirements.