

Cemex bill will have another go in Congress

Environment: Lawmakers prepare proposal that would ban open-pit mining in the Santa Clarita Valley

Jim Holt, Santa Clarita Signal, 4-8-11

Santa Clarita city planners are optimistic that the latest version of the Cemex bill, which Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., introduced to Congress on Thursday, will stand on its merits, offering a way out of the impasse between the city and the Mexican mining firm.

“The senator is optimistic, and we are optimistic that on its merits it is a good bill,” said Michael Murphy, Santa Clarita’s intergovernmental relations officer. “We have yet to hear anybody, on the merits of this bill, express a concern.”

The legislation, titled the Soledad Canyon High Desert, California Public Lands Conservation and Management Act of 2011, underwent some tweaking this time around compared to last year’s version.

If successful, the act would resolve a years-long mining dispute between the city of Santa Clarita and Cemex by requiring the secretary of the interior to cancel current mining contracts in Soledad Canyon and prohibit future mining at the site, Boxer said in a prepared statement.

“This legislation will implement a locally negotiated solution to the Soledad Canyon mining dispute that is supported by both the city of Santa Clarita and Cemex,” the senator said.

“By preventing open-pit mining in the area, we will conserve ecologically important lands and support community development plans throughout the region.”

Boxer’s legislation would cancel Cemex’s sand and gravel mining leases at a Bureau of Land Management site in Soledad Canyon and withdraw the site from future mining.

It would also instruct the land management bureau to sell lands near Victorville that have already been identified for disposal.

The federal government would then use the proceeds to compensate Cemex for the canceled mining contracts.

“Basically, the bill is exactly the same as it was the last time,” Murphy said Thursday. “The reason the bill has not been enacted has nothing to do with its merits, and everything to do with procedural issues in Congress.”

Boxer introduced the bill in the previous Congress, along with U.S. Rep. Howard P. “Buck” McKeon, R-Santa Clarita, who sponsored the bill in the House.

The bill has many fans, including the cities of Santa Clarita and Victorville, Cemex, the Santa Clarita Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and the Sierra Club, according to Boxer’s Washington staff.