

Mining ban bill in both houses

Boxer joins McKeon in decades-long fight against mining company Cemex Inc.

Natalie Everett, Santa Clarita Signal, 3-2-10

For two decades, residents worried that a proposed massive mining operation would cover the Santa Clarita Valley's streets and highways with traffic and fill the air with pollution.

Now, those fears are one step closer to being laid to rest.

U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., introduced legislation Tuesday to squelch Cemex Inc.'s proposed massive mine in Soledad Canyon, joining a similar effort by Congressman Howard "Buck" McKeon.

The bill could resolve a 20-year-old mining dispute between the city of Santa Clarita and Cemex.

The fight goes back to 1990, when the Bureau of Land Management awarded Cemex two consecutive 10-year contracts to extract 56 million tons of sand and gravel from a site in Soledad Canyon, north of Canyon Country. The city, however, strongly opposed Cemex's mining operation expansion.

The ensuing litigation alone spans 10 years. The city and Cemex called a truce in 2007.

Congressman Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Santa Clarita, introduced the sixth version of his Soledad Canyon Mine Act last year. Boxer's bill, the Soledad Canyon High Desert, California Public Lands Conservation and Management Act of 2010, complements McKeon's.

Both bills await hearings in each house's respective policy committees.

The legislation would require the Secretary of the Interior to cancel Cemex's mining contracts in Soledad Canyon and prohibit future mining at the site. The Bureau of Land Management would compensate Cemex for its canceled contracts with earnings from land sales near Victorville.

"My legislation would settle a 20-year-old dispute to all parties' satisfaction, complement future development plans in Southern California, help secure important lands for conservation and do all of this without any cost to taxpayers," Boxer wrote in a statement.

Mike Murphy, Santa Clarita's intergovernmental relations officer, said the legislation is a "very significant moment for the community."

"We're thrilled," Murphy said.

Murphy said Boxer has come to Santa Clarita's aid many times. Boxer was instrumental in defeating the proposed Elsmere Canyon landfill and in securing federal funds for the cross-valley connector, he said.