



McKeon poses mine solution

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Officials say land swap would stop gravel extraction near Santa Clarita, satisfy Cemex

By Jerry Berrios, Staff Writer

SANTA CLARITA - Hoping to finally stop a controversial sand-and-gravel mine project, U.S. Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Santa Clarita, has crafted a complex land swap deal aimed at buying the mining company out of its contract.

McKeon's plan would cancel the federal contracts Cemex has to mine 56 million tons of sand and gravel from land adjacent to Santa Clarita.

In exchange for canceling those contracts, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management would give Cemex about 5,000 acres of land near the city of Victorville.

Cemex would then sell the land to the city of Victorville, which has economic development plans for the property.

Officials from Santa Clarita, Victorville and the mining company lauded the Soledad Canyon Mine Act at a press conference alongside McKeon.

"No longer would we face the potential of mining in Soledad Canyon," Santa Clarita Mayor Bob Kellar said. "Soledad Canyon would be protected as open space for generations to come."

Santa Clarita officials oppose the potential mine because of concerns about air pollution and increased traffic. After years of litigation, city officials and Cemex declared a one-year truce in February 2007, which was later extended.

McKeon said the land in Victorville would not be used for mining.

"We are not trading one mine for another," he said.

The BLM contracts were originally awarded to Transit Mixed Concrete in 1990 bidding. After years of environmental reviews, the project got approval from the federal government in 2000 and from Los Angeles County government in 2004.

Mexico-based Cemex, which now holds the contracts, would have paid the federal government a minimum of \$28 million over 20 years to mine the sand and gravel from a site between Canyon Country and Agua Dulce.

Cemex has already paid BLM about \$4 million in bonds and bid deposits, said BLM spokeswoman Jan Bedrosian.

On Friday, officials said the land swap's costs will be determined by future appraisals of the mining contracts and the BLM land in Victorville.

"We are a willing partner in something that seems to be a no-brainer to me," said Victorville City Councilman Mike Rothschild. "It's a three-way trade."

Cemex cannot walk away from its contracts with the federal government, said Cemex regional president Steve Wise, but this legislation is a viable solution.

"We are eager to bring this dispute to an end and are confident that this important milestone brings us closer to that day," Wise said.

McKeon said he hopes the legislation will become law by the end of the year, which could be difficult with Congress adjourning in September.

"If we don't get it done this year, it would be the first bill I would introduce next year on the first day of Congress," he said.