



An end in sight for Cemex in Soledad Canyon?

With mining company's support, McKeon introduces bill that would kill SCV gravel mine.

April 26, 2008

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An agreement announced Friday by U.S. Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon could halt a nearly decade-long battle between the city of Santa Clarita and global mining company Cemex, Inc. over a planned large-scale mine in Soledad Canyon.

McKeon, R-Santa Clarita, on Thursday introduced what he called "win-win" legislation that would cancel Cemex's two, ten-year mining contracts with the federal Bureau of Land Management, effectively ending any chance that the company could mine at the Soledad Canyon site.

Through H.R. 5887, Cemex would be given thousands of acres land in Victorville equivalent to the value of the contracts. Cemex would then sell the land to the city of Victorville and other private buyers for purposes other than mining.

"It has taken a long time to get to this point. This is a major accomplishment," McKeon said at a news conference outside his Santa Clarita Valley office. "Some people enjoy fighting and other people enjoy getting things done. This is a great example of getting things done."

Through the Bureau of Land Management, Cemex is authorized to mine up to 5 million tons of sand and gravel annually on 400 acres of land in Soledad Canyon. For nearly a decade, the city of Santa Clarita has opposed the Soledad Canyon mine as a scourge that would add pollution and unwanted traffic to Highway 14. The city has spent more than \$8 million fighting the plans and in February 2007, the city and Cemex announced a truce to allow all the parties work out an agreement through legislation.

"It's truly a great day for the city of Santa Clarita," said Mayor Bob Kellar. "Santa Clarita has been rated one of the best places to live because our quality of life has been paramount."

If the legislation is successful, Kellar said, "We would no longer have to worry about the threat this would bring to the city's border."

The Soledad Canyon Mine Act of 2008 is McKeon's fourth attempt to reach an agreement through legislation. This is the first bill Cemex has supported.

"We're 100 percent behind (the agreement) and will be working hard to support it," said Steve Wise, Cemex regional president of Pacific operations, representing Cemex President Gilberto Perez.

The legislation would create the methodology for the U.S. Department of the Interior to determine the value of the contracts, said Mike Murphy, Santa Clarita's intergovernmental relations officer. The value of the contracts will determine how much land would be handed over to Cemex.

The parties have identified about 5,000 acres of federal land for Cemex in Victorville, which lands within McKeon's 25th congressional district. If the value of the contracts is determined to be more than the value of the 5,000 acres, Cemex could acquire additional land in another area of Victorville with 3,000 available acres.

The bill contains a provision that the Victorville land "will not and cannot be used for any future mining," said McKeon. "We're not trading one mine for another."

Cemex would likely sell the majority of the land to the city of Victorville. The two parties have an agreement separate from the legislation.

Murphy said Cemex is not looking to make a profit on the land swap. "They're not looking to get more," he said. "They're looking to get equal value to the contracts here."

Victorville officials see the land swap as a boon to the city's economic development plan since the BLM land had been earmarked for mining by a different mining company.

"This is a win-win for everybody," said Victorville Councilman Mike Rothschild. He said the deal would be beneficial for their local economy and the environment.

McKeon said the BLM has not taken a position of support on the agreement and McKeon is hoping the department won't eventually oppose the bill.

The unsuccessful bills McKeon previously introduced would have provided Cemex with land outside Santa Clarita and would have scaled down mining potential to historic levels of 300,000 tons per year.

"The prior legislation I introduced I knew didn't have a chance," McKeon told *The Signal*. "But we had to start there with just eliminating the mine. What we've worked out here is an agreement with all the parties concerned that can actually work and I think has the potential of actually getting done."

Both Kellar and Council-woman Laurene Weste, who both sit on the council committee devoted to resolving the issue, plan to travel to Washington, D.C., to lobby for the bill.

McKeon said that if the bill dies in Congress before the end of the year, he will re-introduce the legislation on the first day of the next session.

"We know there are many potential obstacles. There's lots of steps and we'll be working to be as expeditiously as possible," he said. "With all the major players on board, we have a strong team to take this legislation proposal back to Washington and begin the uphill process of working it through Congress."