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SMARA: 50 YEARS

50 Years of
Responsible Resource
Stewardship

*Honoring SMARA and
California's Aggregates Industry*



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SMARA at 50: A conservation framework born of California’s environmental awakening

By Adam Harper, Senior Director of Policy, CalCIMA. The author has been involved in SMARA policy development and implementation since 1999.



Through phased reclamation under SMARA, the George Reed Clements Pit mines and restores the Reed Family Orchard, demonstrating how surface-mined lands can return to productive agricultural use while preserving working landscapes.

California marks the 50th anniversary of the Surface Mining and Reclamation Act (SMARA) in 2026. It’s a law that quietly reshaped how California manages working lands, mineral resources, and post-mining landscapes. In other words, the act has been a profoundly important conservation framework, and also shows the lifecycle of important California land.

Understanding SMARA’s origins is essential to understanding its durability, and why it continues to matter as California confronts housing shortages, climate adaptation, wildfire resilience,

water infrastructure needs, and critical mineral supply challenges. Mineral and rock producers hope that policymakers, agency heads and environmental groups join us to tell this 50-year story.

Environmental Awakening and the Need for a New Framework

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, environmental policy in the United States had entered a period of rapid transformation. The Cuyahoga River fire, the publication of *Silent Spring*, and growing public concern over air and water pollution catalyzed a wave of landmark legislation. Congress enacted the National

Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act. In California, the legislature adopted the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the CA Endangered Species Act, and expanded statewide approaches to land and resource management.

Up to that point, most regulation affecting mining and other industrial activities had been by local governments. Its focus was on health and safety ordinances, building codes, nuisance controls, and zoning requirements. While some operators reclaimed land

voluntarily, this did not ensure long-term land restoration, nor did it resolve conflicts where mineral deposits crossed jurisdictional boundaries or where urban expansion encroached on finite mineral resource areas.

SMARA emerged at the intersection of these realities. It was designed to fill a critical gap: 1) Establish a statewide land-use and reclamation framework to ensure mined lands would be restored to usable and environmentally sound conditions once extraction ended, and 2) Map and conserve for potential future development and societal benefit the state's essential mineral resources.

Senator John Nejedly authored SMARA. He explained the following in his 1975 letter to Governor Edmund G. Brown requesting favorable consideration of SB 756 (SMARA):

"...existing controls do not (1) adequately assure that reclamation will occur, (2) provide a mechanism to resolve jurisdictional problems when mineral deposits cross city

and county boundaries, and (3) recognize the need to protect mineral resource deposits from the effects of urbanization."

This framing remains central to SMARA's role today.

A Conservation Ethic Rooted in Stewardship

Often overlooked in modern debates is the conservation philosophy embedded in SMARA. Conservation, as understood by the law's authors, did not mean locking landscapes away from use. It meant managing working lands responsibly, balancing extraction for infrastructure projects with restoration. Lawmakers were adamant in protecting resources essential to society.

A fundamental recognition in SMARA is that mineral resources exist only where geology placed them. They are finite, location-specific, and foundational to human civilization, from housing and transportation to renewable energy, water systems, and wildfire-resilient infrastructure.

SMARA explicitly recognized this reality by pairing reclamation requirements with policies to identify and conserve mineral resource lands of regional and statewide significance.

Reclamation and Restoration

SMARA's definition of reclamation is both practical and ecological. The law focuses on recontouring, slope stability, revegetation, erosion control, water quality, and post-mining land uses compatible with surrounding conditions and community needs.

Over time, reclaimed mines across California have become housing developments, schools, parks, agricultural lands, wetlands, flood control facilities, habitat preserves, and open space. SMARA encourages reclamation concurrent with mining activities so that many mines restore habitat and undertake other reclamation activities as they mine. While satellite imagery enables us to highlight high-visibility

A pond and wildlife habitat field mark the successful SMARA reclamation of the 711 Materials Waterford Pit in Stanislaus County, with the land now owned and stewarded by the Reed family.





Above: Planting of native Santa Cruz Sandhills species at Graniterock's Quail Hollow Quarry.

Below: Jacquie Borges, Environmental Engineer, and Rachel Reed, Senior Land Use Specialist at Graniterock's 21.6-acre A.R. Wilson Quarry revegetation area, featuring coast live oak woodland, grassland, and scrub species.



conversions of final reclamation of land to residential or commercial use, it should be emphasized that mines reclaim to landforms suitable for such development. The majority of reclaimed mine lands return to open space or naturalized conditions reflecting California's broader land-use reality.

According to the California Natural Resources Agency's 2022 Nature-Based Solutions strategy, only a small fraction of the state's land, roughly six percent, is developed. Most landscapes remain open space, agricultural, or managed for natural resource values as over 25% of the state is durably conserved. Mine reclamation outcomes likely mirror that distribution.

Modernization and Enduring Relevance

SMARA has become one of the state's most dynamic laws and a model for updating old

frameworks. Legislative updates, including major reforms in the early 1990s and later modernization efforts such as AB 1142 in the last decade, strengthened financial assurance bonding, clarified state oversight, and improved consistency across jurisdictions. These updates reinforced the act's original purpose while adapting it to contemporary expectations.

Throughout these changes, SMARA has remained distinct from environmental statutes governing pollution control. As Assemblymember Byron Sher (D-Palo Alto) later emphasized, SMARA is fundamentally a land-use and reclamation law, complementary to environmental frameworks.

Looking Ahead: Why SMARA at 50 Matters

As California navigates climate adaptation, housing affordability, infrastructure renewal, wildfire

safety and critical mineral supply chains, SMARA's relevance is growing. SMARA's story demonstrates that resource development and environmental stewardship can work in tandem, and that long-term planning can align economic necessity with land restoration.

Throughout the 50th anniversary year, CalCIMA will highlight reclamation outcomes, historic investments, and modern success stories that illustrate how the act has worked in practice. These stories, grounded in real landscapes, partnerships, and communities will help inform industry, policymakers, educators, and the public about a law that quietly shaped California's working lands for half a century.

This article is only the beginning of a series of activities and articles this year to recognize the accomplishments of SMARA. ■