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EDITORIAL

Save the condor, not the gun lobby

Gov. Schwarzenegger should sign a bill to curb lead ammunition.

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The gun lobby certainly knows how to take aim and fire. Unfortunately, this time the target is a partial ban on lead hunting ammunition, to give the California condor a better chance at survival.

After years of dithering while the rare birds commonly showed overexposure to lead, the state this year appeared on the verge of requiring hunters to use non-lead ammunition in the condors' range. That's important, because the evidence shows the carrion eaters ingest the lead while feasting on carcasses left by hunters.

The ban is so reasonable and so overdue, it's hard to fathom why the state hadn't acted long before. The federal government has outlawed lead ammunition in its waterways because of the potential for poisoning birds. The private Tejon Ranch -- prime hunting and condor territory -- was also out ahead of the state in imposing a ban.

This year, the state Fish and Game Commission took its first serious steps toward a possible ban, pushed along by Commissioner R. Judd Hanna. And despite the gun lobby's efforts, the Legislature sent AB 821 to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. The bill would ban lead ammunition in a roughly U-shaped area that takes in the Sierra Nevada and coastal mountains in the central and southern parts of the state.

Then things fell apart. The commission urged Schwarzenegger to veto the bill, saying the Legislature was usurping the commission's regulatory power. The argument rings hollow. Given the commission's failure to do anything about ammunition despite the pleas of wildlife specialists, legislative action was entirely appropriate.

But the gun lobby's muscle-flexing didn't stop at this point. Under pressure from hunters, 34 Republican legislators wrote to Schwarzenegger complaining about Hanna. Under pressure from the governor's office, Hanna resigned. Hanna was no knee-jerk environmentalist. A hunter, farmer and former real estate developer -- and a Republican Schwarzenegger appointee -- he nonetheless had arrived at the strong conviction that lead ammunition was dooming the multimillion-dollar effort to save the condor from extinction.

The one-two punch puts the legislation's fate in doubt and compromises the commission's ability to reach any sort of reasonable decision on lead ammunition. Even if remaining commissioners are inclined toward a ban, they surely got the underlying message: Back a condor, lose your job. The governor blew one chance to show that he doesn't give in to this kind of power play. Now he has another. He should sign AB 821.

Schwarzenegger chose the condor as an icon to go on the California quarter, even though there are only about 70 wild birds left in the state. We hope he's planning to preserve the California condor as more than an image on a coin.