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## California activists call for lead ammunition ban to aid condors

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. - A coalition of environmentalists, American Indians and hunters is asking regulators to issue an emergency ban on lead ammunition in the condor's feeding territory and eventually statewide.

"This is imperative to get this going. We feel this is an emergency issue for the condor," said Jeff Miller, a researcher with the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups filing the petition with the state Fish and Game Commission.

The move comes 18 months after state wildlife managers started a voluntary plan to protect California condors from lead poisoning. Separate studies for the state and federal wildlife agencies last year found condor lead poisoning increased during the fall hunting season.

A problem has been hunters who leave an estimated 30,000 unburied carcasses or entrails across the condor's range, which are eaten by the scavengers.

But state condor preservation officials said survival is at an all-time high. Also, hunting regulations aren't up for routine review until 2007, leaving it uncertain if they will consider the plea from the activists who say traditional ammunition is too toxic.

The next commission meeting is in February.

"We were losing a half-dozen to a dozen a year either to death or having to bring them in (to captivity) for bad behavior or something," said Fish and Game Department biologist Ron Jurek, a member of the California Condor Recovery Team. But none has died in 14 months. "We've never had such good survival. Things are looking up now."

Part is due to better management of the condors, including keeping them away from carcasses killed with lead bullets, Jurek said. Most condors are tracked with radio collars, allowing managers to spot sick birds and recapture them for treatment. And veterinarians are better able to treat acute lead poisoning, as they are doing now with a condor in Arizona.

But as more condors are released and forage naturally over as much a 150-mile range, they'll encounter more lead-laced carcasses, said the environmental group's Miller. "We're going to see lead mortality go way up."

The wild condor population dropped to just 15 in 1984, but the population in California now tops 100. About 10 condors since 1995 have died or undergone intense treatment for lead poisoning in California, Jurek said.

Nonlead shotgun ammunition already is required nationwide for hunting waterfowl. But wildlife agencies in Arizona, Utah and California - which each have reintroduced populations of the giant bird - hope a voluntary program will work without requiring an outright ban on lead bullets.

They recently completed a survey of hunters and ranchers about their use of lead-based ammunition. Now they're beginning an education program, coupled with encouraging sporting goods stores to carry alternatives to lead ammunition. Then they'll resurvey hunters and ranchers to see if the programs worked.

The petition was filed Thursday by the Center for Biological Diversity, Natural Resources Defense Council, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, Ventana Wilderness Alliance, and the Wishtoyo Foundation, founded by a Chumash Tribe ceremonial leader in Ventura County, which is prime condor habitat.

It asks the game commission to phase out the use of lead bullets to kill large game like deer and wild pigs in south-central California, where the condors reside. The groups eventually want the commission to phase out the ammunition statewide, as a dan-

ger to other scavengers like eagles.

Anthony Prieto and three fellow hunters founded Project Gutpile after they volunteered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's condor recovery team and saw the damage lead can do. Their Web site advises about alternative ammunition and how to remove or safeguard contaminated carcasses.

Prieto, who joined the petition, said focus groups of hunters showed many resented having to switch to different ammunition.

"They were just like, 'Why do we have to suffer? How do we know the contaminants come from us?'" said Prieto, of Santa Barbara.

While he and Jurek said individual hunters feel strongly, no organized opposition has surfaced among hunting organizations. But the condor project itself opposes a ban, partly for fear some irate hunter might retaliate against condors, Jurek said. Calls seeking comment from the National Rifle Association and National Shooting Sports Foundation were not immediately returned.

Prieto said he switched to copper bullets and that it would be easier transition if lead was phased out while alternatives were phased in.