

Assembly shoots down bill to limit use of lead bullets

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A proposal to limit the use of lead bullets in key parts of the endangered California condor's Southland habitat was shot down by the Assembly on Tuesday.

A bill by Assemblyman Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara, was voted down 6-8 by the Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee.

He vowed to try again next year.

"I'm gravely disappointed," Mr. Nava said. "Another year without protection means we're going to lose some more birds and that's a high price to pay."

Condors can become ill or die, biologists say, after swallowing lead bullets embedded in the carcasses they dine on.

The ban would have covered parts of Los Padres National Forest. The proposal applied to anyone targeting coyotes or big-game species -- bear, deer, bighorn sheep, elk, pronghorn antelope and wild pigs.

The legislation also provided for hunters to be supplied with lead-free ammunition at no cost, and for the effects of the effort to be monitored over a three-year period. Mr. Nava said he named Assembly Bill 2123 the Ridley-Tree Condor Preservation Act in recognition of Leslie Ridley-Tree and her late husband, Paul Ridley-Tree's support of condor conservation.

Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity said he wasn't surprised by the bill's defeat.

"We're taking a hard look at bringing some legal action," he added.

Some hunters aren't keen to go lead-free because they say the bullets don't measure up to other ammunition, and they cost more.

The National Rifle Association has argued that there's still a "question mark" as to what causes elevated lead levels in condors.

Many opponents also slammed

the bill as a backdoor step toward banning hunting and eroding gun rights.

Mr. Nava said that's "so far from the truth it's offensive."

"Taxpayers have spent millions, millions on condor restoration only to have those efforts thwarted by the gun lobby and those special interests," he added. "It's clear to me that the opponents of this bill don't care about the taxpayers. They're only concerned with their narrow, selfish interests."

"It was pretty clear that the opposition was grasping at straws," Mr. Nava said, "and they had no solid scientific basis to contest the impacts of lead."

Mike Wallace, who heads the California Condor Recovery Team, said high levels of lead paralyze a condor's digestive system, meaning "they can't digest food."

At least three condors in California have died of lead poisoning, he said, and nine wild birds had to be captured and given treatment to remove lead

from their bloodstream -- a labor-intensive undertaking.

In Arizona, Mr. Wallace said two birds died of lead poisoning a few weeks ago, and in all, veterinarians have administered 77 treatments to birds there since 1997.

“We can’t wait another 25 years,” Mr. Miller said. “This lead problem has been known since the ‘80s.”

In recent years, there have been efforts to educate California hunters about lead-free ammunition and encourage them to bury gut piles containing lead fragments. Rebates also have been offered on lead-free ammunition.

“While voluntary compliance is helpful, it clearly isn’t enough to rescue this species from extinction,” Mr. Nava said.

California condor populations plummeted to 21 birds in the 1980s, prompting an effort to breed the birds in captivity. Now there are more than 250 condors, nearly half of them flying free in California, Arizona and Baja California.