

CALIFORNIA

Groups sue over lead shot to save condors

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Environmentalists, hunters and physicians sued the state Fish and Game Department on Thursday in an attempt to force the agency to ban the use of lead ammunition -- in the hunting of deer and wild pig -- that has been tracked to deaths in endangered California condors.

Condors can eat animal carcasses left behind by hunters and absorb the toxic metal at levels that can injure or kill them, said the suit filed in the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles. The suit says the state should allow the use of copper shot as a safe alternative to lead.

As of August, 138 condors had been introduced to the wild from the captive-breeding program, with 61 in California.

The plaintiffs include individual hunters and Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Natural Resources Defense Council, **Center for Biological Diversity** and the Wishtoyo Foundation, an American Indian group.

The hunters and physicians want to avoid the risk of poisonous ammunition in game animals, while the American Indian group supports the survival of the California condor, a bird used as a symbol in its dances, songs and prayers.

Environmentalists say the lead is killing off a bird that is on the brink of extinction.

Lead, which can cause brain and other neurological injuries, has been banned in paint, gasoline, pipes and other plumbing. Under federal law, hunters shooting waterfowl can't use lead shot.

In some states other than California, hunters seeking upland game such as quail or partridge also can't use lead shot.

Lead shot and lead fishing tackle are banned in national parks and national wildlife refuges as a result of the poisonings of eagles, swans and loons, according to the plaintiffs.

The suit comes two years after the groups petitioned the Fish and Game Department, asking for the regulation of lead ammunition. When the department didn't act on it, the plaintiffs filed a notice-to-sue letter, prompting officials from the department to acknowledge that they would take up the matter early next year.