

Effort to ban lead bullets to protect condors takes wing

By Paul Rogers

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A long-running debate about whether lead from hunters' bullets is poisoning endangered California condors is heading for a political showdown.

And armed with new scientific studies, environmentalists and wildlife biologists may be gaining the upper hand.

Last month, the California Department of Fish and Game staff recommended that hunting with lead bullets be banned everywhere in the California condor range, a vast area of about 20 counties that extends from the Bay Area to Los Angeles and takes in parts of the Tehachapi Mountains.

The department's recommendation to the California Fish and Game Commission was cheered by environmental groups, which have been seeking such a ban for years but were rejected by the department and the commission in 2005.

The commission, a five-member body appointed by the governor, will hear public testimony on the plan at its April 13 meeting in Bodega Bay. It is expected to vote in May or June.

"If there is connectivity between the use of lead bullets and that presents a threat - almost of any measure - to the condor, then they should be banned. I have no problem with that at all," said Richard Rogers, president of the commission.

What changed? The science, state biologists say.

"There wasn't enough science and other information before to show a causal link between legitimate hunting and risk to condors from lead poisoning," said Dale Steele, program manager for wildlife species conservation for the Fish and Game department.

"It's still not very well understood, but there is additional information in publications that have come out since then."

Environmental groups and many biologists have long believed that the condors, which are highly endangered and feed by scavenging dead animals, are poisoned when they ingest lead fragments after eating dead deer, wild pigs and other animals shot by hunters.

"Lead paralyzes the digestive tract. The birds starve to death," said Kelly Sorenson, executive director of the Ventana Wildlife Society, a non-profit that has reintroduced dozens of condors to Big Sur and the Pinnacles National Monument near Hollister.

Sorenson supports a ban on lead bullets in the condor range, and also in the historic condor range, which would extend the territory affected into the Sierra.

Factual basis

Sorenson said 13 condors have been confirmed killed by lead in Arizona and California since the birds were reintroduced to the wild 15 years ago. And roughly one-third of the birds in Northern California have been found with high, sometimes dangerously high, lead levels in their blood.

He and other environmentalists note that all states banned lead shot for hunting ducks and other waterfowl a decade ago.

Some hunting groups, however, say that alternatives - copper bullets - are expensive and not as readily available as lead. Copper bullets can cost \$40 for a box of 20, compared with roughly \$20 for lead bullets.

More broadly, some hunters fear erosion of gun rights.

"These guys just want to ban all hunting. It's a foothold," said Sam Paredes, president of the Gun Owners of California, based in Sacramento.

"This is anti-lead. Not anti-hunting or anti-gun," Sorenson countered.

Other hunting groups have remained neutral as studies increasingly have found direct links between bullets and condor

poisoning.

"I would agree the science has gotten stronger," said Bill Gaines, president of the California Outdoor Heritage Alliance, a hunting advocacy organization.

"There's a lot of ways that lead can find its way into the system. Lead bullets aren't the only cause. But the data is stronger that hunting is having some impact."

Gaines said that if the commission bans lead bullets in the condor range, it should help hunters pay for copper bullets. Arizona officials have spent roughly \$200,000 on such a plan, and hunters have praised the copper ammunition's performance.

"There's a lot of emotions on both sides," Gaines said. "If the commission does ban lead in the condor range, we would argue there should be a very strong monitoring program put in place to see if it is having the benefits people wanted. If not, the ban ought to be lifted."

The Fish and Game department, however, has struggled with budget shortfalls for years and has no funding for monitoring or for rebates to make copper bullets cheaper.

With wingspans up to 10 feet and a daily flying range of 150 miles, condors once ranged from British Columbia to Mexico. Because of habitat loss, hunting and lead poisoning, they began declining around the Gold Rush and reached a low of 22 birds nationwide in the early 1980s. Federal biologists captured all remaining wild condors in 1987 and began breeding them in zoos.

Today the population of California condors has grown to 279. Of those, 127 live in the wild at Big Sur, Pinnacles, Ventura County, the Grand Canyon and Baja California. The rest live in captivity at the Los Angeles Zoo, San Diego Wild Animal Park, Oregon Zoo and World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho.

During the past two years, new studies have boosted the case for banning lead bullets.

In August, toxicologists at the University of California-Santa Cruz used a "fingerprinting" technique tracking isotope ratios in lead. They sampled 26 condors and found that in 77percent of condors with elevated lead levels, the lead in their bodies matched lead bullets commonly sold to hunters. The findings were published online Aug.30 by the journal Environmental Science & Technology.

Exploding bullets

Similarly, a study published in 2005 by the Peregrine Fund, an Idaho non-profit group, in the Wildlife Society Bulletin, showed that lead bullets often explode inside animals. The study involved X-rays of 38 mule deer and showed that lead bullets broke into as many as 521 fragments inside the animals.

"We've gotten lead out of gasoline and paint and cookware," said Jeff Miller, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity in San Francisco. "The last major source of lead we are putting into the environment is from shooting."

The center sued the Fish and Game department in November seeking a ban. That case is pending. A bill in the Legislature also would ban lead bullets in condor habitat.

"It's clear the end of lead ammunition for hunting in California is coming," Miller said. "Are we going to ban it now or put it off?"