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Lead bullets in carcass poison released condors

Three undergo treatment to remove toxin

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A wild California condor that was among eight recaptured by wildlife biologists after they were seen feeding on a hunter-killed wild pig carcass at Pinnacles National Monument is hovering near death at the Los Angeles Zoo, where he was taken Tuesday for treatment of severe lead poisoning.

The 5-year-old male, which had been released in Big Sur, was the most severely affected of the flock of carrion feeders, said Joe Burnett, wildlife biologist with the Ventana Wildlife Society.

Five of the eight condors had elevated lead levels in their bloodstreams, he said, and three required extensive treatment at Los Angeles Zoo to remove the lethal toxin.

The Big Sur condor had the most severe exposure of the group, and veterinary staff members at the zoo are struggling to keep him alive, Burnett said.

“This condor’s lead level was the highest ever recorded in the wild flock,” he said, “and while the odds are against his full recovery, biologists remain optimistic he will live to fly free another day.”

Exposure to lead from ammunition has been prevalent in the condor ranges in California and Arizona since the onset of releases. The state Fish and Game Commission expects to hear from ammunition manufacturers on the issue of a lead bullet ban for big game hunting when it meets next month in Sacramento. Any changes in current hunting regulations are unlikely to go into effect before July 1, 2008, because the regulatory cycle tends to coincide with the hunting season, said Adrianna Shea, deputy executive director of the Fish and Game Commission.

The commission, however, could take action on making changes by late this year or early next, she said.

“We hope to solicit additional information from manufacturers to include in a new environmental

document and regulatory package,” Shea said.

The commission has been grappling with the lead bullet issue for the past several years in an effort to protect California condors, which have been reintroduced into the wild after teetering on the brink of extinction.

In August 2006, scientists at the University of California-Santa Cruz published findings in the journal *Environmental Science & Technology* that lead from bullets left in carcasses or gut piles from game animals is a major source of lead poisoning in the endangered birds.

In November, a consortium of environmental activists — including the Wishtoyo Foundation, Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Natural Resources Defense Council — sued in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles seeking such a ban.

The UC-Santa Cruz researchers used a “fingerprinting” technique based on unique isotope ratios found in different sources of lead. The

technique enabled them to match lead in condor blood samples to lead in ammunition.

In February, Tejon Ranch Corp. announced that nonlead ammunition will be required for all hunting and predator control on its 270,000-acre Southern California ranch starting in 2008 to protect condors that forage there.

The commission has a number of issues to resolve, Shea said, including whether a lead bullet ban should extend to depredation permits for wild animals, such as feral pigs, that damage pastures and crops, and defining what areas of the state constitute condor range.

“We only have regulatory authority for big game,” she said. “We’re hoping to clarify the pig depredation

issue. We can specify using nonlead ammunition on depredation permits.”

The commission had initially considered defining the condor range based on the state Department of Fish and Game deer zone areas, but is now considering using more recognizable boundary landmarks, such as major highways, Shea said.

The Ventana Wildlife Society supports hunting with use of nonlead ammunition, Burnett said, because lead bullets often fragment into hundreds of pieces upon impact, while nonlead ammunition stays intact and presents no toxic threat to condors.

“Ventana is asking that hunters remove the entire carcass from the field if it is shot with lead bullets,”

Burnett said, but the society strongly encourages hunters to make the switch to commercially available nonlead hunting ammo to help save the condors.

The Fish and Game Commission will convene in the resources auditorium of Fish and Game headquarters, 1416 9th St., Sacramento, at a time to be announced.