

## Lead bullet ban adopted

*Legislation intends to protect condors*

Lead ammunition, such as the bullet at left, is now banned for hunting in the California condor range. (DAVID ROYAL/Herald file)

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A ban on lead bullets for hunting in the California condor range was adopted Friday by the state Fish and Game Commission.

The ban goes beyond legislation adopted last summer and signed into law by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The new regulations prohibit possessing lead ammunition and a gun that can shoot it while hunting in the condor range.

The ban extends to .22 caliber rimfire ammunition and shotgun ammunition, which was exempted in the original legislation, Assembly Bill 821, the Ridley-Tree Condor Preservation Act, written by Assemblyman Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara.

At present, no .22 caliber rimfire ammunition is made with nonlead bullets.

The regulations don't specify what lead-free bullets are. As adopted, it states that the Fish and Game Commission "will determine maximum allowable trace lead levels to be within a range of 0 to 10 percent by weight" at some future time, based on information from bullet manufacturers.

Even "nonlead" copper or bismuth bullets contain traces of lead.

The condor range specified in AB 821 takes in the coastal mountain ranges and the Sierra Nevada, but excludes most of the Central Valley. The range is based on data gathered by the Ventana Wildlife Society and others involved in the release of condors raised in captivity back into the wild since 1997.

Many free-flying condors have global positioning satellite transmitters affixed to them, and their movements can be tracked.

Based on tracking, the condor range was determined to extend north of the Pinnacles to Diablo Mountain, the Coast Range and Big Sur, south to Ventura County and across the Tehachapi Mountains to the southern Sierra.

AB 821 requires that the state Department of Finance determine if sufficient funding is available to pay for a coupon program for free or reduced-charge nonlead ammunition for hunters.

Condors remain a fully protected species under state law. The state and federal governments list the California condor as an endangered species.

The lead ban is intended to protect reintroduced California condors from lead poisoning by eating carcasses shot by hunters and ingesting lead bullet fragments or pellets.

Condors, according to scientists, are particularly vulnerable to lead poisoning, and lead-caused deaths this year accelerated pressure on the Legislature by wildlife groups to move for a ban on bullets to prevent condors from eating them along with carrion from shot game carcasses or gut piles.

Since 1992, according to the Center for Biological Diversity, at least 12 condor deaths in the state have been caused by lead poisoning, and other condors have had to undergo treatment after ingesting lead.

"It's the best protection for the condor," said Kelly Sorenson, executive director of the Ventana Wildlife Society, the only nonprofit organization releasing condors in California.

California is the first state to enact such a ban, he said. Arizona has had a voluntary program of hunting with nonlead bullets in its condor range, with the state subsidizing purchases of more expensive ammunition.

Beginning in 2008, Tejon Ranch Corp. will require nonlead ammunition be used for all hunting and predator control on its 270,000-acre property in the Tehachapi Mountains, the largest private hunting program in the state.

Banning .22-caliber lead bullets, Sorenson said, may drive the industry to manufacture nonlead ammunition for its customers.

The society has been working for 10 years on reintroducing condors raised in zoos to Big Sur in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pinnacles National Monument, San Diego Wild Animal Park, Los Angeles Zoo and other organizations.