

Condor case

A group of environmental organizations have joined forces to preserve the critically endangered California condor by filing suit against the California Fish and Game Commission.

The groups, including the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Center for Biological Diversity, Physicians for Social Responsibility and the Wishtoyo Foundation, allege the commission placed the condors in the line of fire by failing to regulate the use of lead ammunition used by hunters.

James Birkelund, staff attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said there is enough evidence to prove that the commission is in violation of the federal Endangered Species Act by not taking further measures to protect the critically endangered birds.

According to the NRDC, the California condor is one of the most endangered animals in the world. They were so close to extinction that the last 22 wild birds were rounded up as part of a captive-breeding program in 1982. Of the 67 condors released back into Southern California between 1992 and 2002, 32 have died or disappeared and are presumed dead. Scientists say poisoning from lead ammunition is likely responsible for many of the deaths.

The scientific evidence is clear that condors are being poisoned on a routine basis as the result of lead ammunition, said Birkelund, who added that the groups will likely file suit sometime after mid September.

Birkelund explained that because condors are scavengers they often eat fragments of lead bullets, which tend to splinter after they make contact. The birds often eat entrails left behind by hunters, as well as the carcasses of animals that wander off and die after they are shot. This has been a recurring problem, he said. All we are asking for are some common sense measures to combat the condor deaths. This can be a win-win situation.

Steve Martarano, a spokesman for the California Department of Fish and Game, said the commission ruled against a petition filed by the same agencies in 2005, when the group of environmental advocates first attempted to curb the use of lead ammunition. There hasn't been any data that supports unequivocally that lead poisoning is the reason the condors have died, he said, but we are taking this very seriously.

Martarano went on to say that the environmental groups haven't acknowledged the measures the commission has taken to educate the public, hunters specifically, about the dangers of lead ammunition, or the measures taken to make sure the birds' food sources are safe. Blood samples from the birds are also routinely taken, he said, and a lead reduction subcommittee has been established to address concerns.

“Lead bullets are still being used and we're still studying the issue,” Martarano said. “The commission is still looking for the best available science.”