

Survey: 90 percent of big-game hunters taking steps to protect condors

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PHOENIX — More Arizona big-game hunters are participating in a voluntary program aimed at preventing California condors from being poisoned by lead, state officials say.

Ninety percent of hunters with permits for deer, elk and other big game in 2008 took steps including using non-lead ammunition and removing so-called gut piles that condors scavenge, according to a survey by the Arizona Game and Fish Department. That's up from 80 percent in 2007.

"We're incredibly proud of our sportsmen's participation in this program," said Ron Sieg, Game and Fish regional supervisor for north-central Arizona.

At least 12 California condors have died of lead poisoning since the species was reintroduced to northern Arizona in 1996, and others have been treated for lead exposure. There have been no reported deaths from lead since 2006, when four condors died.

However, leaders of some environmental groups contend that any lead in the condors' habitat is too much. They would like to see Arizona follow California, which in 2007 enacted a law requiring non-lead ammunition for hunting big game and coyotes in areas where condors scavenge.

"It only takes a little lead to affect a large population," said Jeff Miller, conservation advocate for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity. "We have been really lucky that no condors have died in the last two years."

Kim Crumbo, conservation director with the Flagstaff-based Grand Canyon Wildlands Council, commended participating hunters but said the effects of lead can't be ignored in any amount.

"It is a health risk in the environment and even to the hunters who eat the deer meat," Crumbo said. "The simple solution would be to ban the use of lead ammunition. It is kind of a no-brainer."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has banned the use of lead shot for waterfowl hunting nationally because the pellets were poisoning birds that ate them off the bottoms of streams and lakes.

In 1982, there were only 22 California condors remaining anywhere. Captive breeding programs had brought their numbers to 326 in California, Arizona and Baja California as of December. There were 66 in Arizona at last count, according to Game and Fish.

Arizona's ammunition program, which started in 2005, uses lottery and American Indian gaming proceeds distributed through the Heritage Fund to provide coupons for hunters to buy non-lead bullets, which aren't available in all calibers.

Those with permits to hunt big game on the Kaibab and Paria plateaus in northern Arizona receive DVDs and other information explaining the dangers of lead and steps that can reduce the danger to condors.

A Game and Fish survey found that 654 successful hunters used non-lead ammunition while hunting in the condors' range during the fall hunting season. Another 160 removed gut piles or took other actions to keep lead away from condors, it found.

Kathy Sullivan, California Condor Project coordinator for Game and Fish, said hunters are glad to learn about the dangers of lead and are inclined to act accordingly to protect condors.

"We think that 90 percent participation shows how highly effective a volunteer program can be," Sullivan said. "It makes a ban unnecessary."
