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No ban on lead

Proposals to halt use of lead ammunition, to spare condors and raptors, are voted down

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California's hunters dodged a nonlead bullet yesterday as the California Fish and Game Commission denied two requests from environmental groups to ban the use of lead bullets in condor country and statewide.

Voting 3-1 against both requests, with Commissioner Bob Hattoy of Long Beach twice the lone dissenter, the commission denied a request from the Center for Biological Diversity and other groups to take emergency action and ban the use of lead bullets by hunters in California condor habitat.

The commission also refused the request to ban lead bullets and shot in all hunting in the state to protect all raptors, which, like condors, eat remains of animals shot with lead ammunition.

"To say hunters are solely responsible for the deaths of condors because of lead and to put the onus on hunters is unfair," said Commissioner Michael Flores as the two-day meeting wrapped up at Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute. "Hunters and conservation groups put their money where their mouths are and do the work on the ground to bring species back. That's why duck numbers are up. That's why wild turkey numbers are up."

Commission President Jim Kellogg instructed the Department of Fish and Game to report back regularly on the status of condors and the lead issue.

As it always has, the condor issue brought out plenty of emotions.

Dr. Steve Beissinger of the University of California at Berkeley, representing the Center for Biological Diversity, said the commission has turned "the condor recovery into put-and-take, just like your trout from hatcheries."

The bird was nearly extinct in the mid-1980s, but a captive breeding and release program sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the DFG prevented the bird from following the grizzly bear and being extirpated from California.

There are 57 condors in the wild in California and three breeding pairs in zoos, according to Ron Jurek, the DFG's leading biologist and authority on condors. The Condor Recovery Team's goal set in 1996 was to have 150 individuals in the wild and 15 breeding pairs. They're far short of that, but the bird recently was included on the state's new quarter. The grizzly still graces the state flag.

But the question here yesterday was about the ever-struggling condors and whether hunters were responsible for the high amount of lead content found in sick and dead condors through the years.

Jurek, who has been working on the condor issue for the DFG since the late 1970s, detailed the history of the bird's demise and subsequent recovery program. He is more optimistic about their survival now because the younger birds have older role models who have survived since releases in 1995.

Jurek said California did not lose a single condor in 2004, but he added: "No one here believes that will continue." He

detailed how birds have been treated for high lead poisoning and then re-released.

From 1997 to 2004, Jurek said there were two lead-related deaths to condors in California and 19 other birds showed signs of high levels of lead. He said the birds have stayed alive because researchers won't let them die and are constantly caring, feeding or helping the birds survive.

But no California condors have died of anything since October 2003. And the last high-lead incident with a condor was in June of 2003, Jurek said.

Bob Byrne, conservation director for Safari Club International, detailed information he gleaned from surveys and phone interviews of hunters. Byrne said it will be important to get hunters and ranchers to cooperate in all condor recovery efforts.

"Linking this to the conservation heritage that hunters know is critical," Byrne said. "If you don't do that, you won't be effective in communicating the plan."

Ken Range, who has an 18,000-acre hunting ranch, Rock Springs Ranch, near Pinnacles National Monument in San Benito County, a release site for the condor, opposed the proposals. Range also is chairman of the San Benito County Fish and Game Commission.

"Our county commission simply believes this is not an emergency," Range said. "There is not enough information . . . There needs to be more investigation of it and if they determine there is a problem it should be phased in."

Jack Bransford, chairman of the San Diego County Fish and Wildlife Commission and president of the San Diego County Wildlife Federation, agreed with Range. He gave the commissioners an article from The Pinnacle, a weekly newspaper in San Benito County, that detailed how free-flying condors in the Sespe Condor Sanctuary were feeding their chicks trash such as bottle caps, plastic, glass and even bolts. One chick died, while another was “brought back from the brink of death after X-rays revealed a miniature landfill inside its stomach,” The Pinnacle reported.

Anthony Prieto of Santa Barbara, a hunter who now uses nonlead shot, said after the decision, “I’m a little bummed out that we were denied. But we’ll be back. We probably only got to first base, but I’ll steal second, steal third and I’m coming home. If you have not seen a California condor in the wild, you’re missing out.”

Flores ended the meeting with a final word to those who filed the petition to ban lead bullets.

“I say this to the representatives from the Natural Resources Defense Council because, quite often, when you don’t get what you want, you go to the courts,” Flores said. “It’s a mistake to do that in this case. You spend money, money that could go to help fund studies. We end up losing money and spending time and resources in court that we don’t have. Then the very thing that we try to accomplish loses out. In this case, the condor loses. Think long and hard about that.”