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Suit to target lead bullets to protect condors

Coalition claims ammunition poisoning endangered birds

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Those on the front lines of the fight to protect the endangered California condor agree lead poisoning is one of the greatest threats to the bird's survival.

Where that lead comes from is a thornier question. Many condor advocates blame lead ammunition; California condors feed on carrion, including that left behind by hunters. Some hunting groups, on the other hand, maintain the link between condors' lead levels and lead ammunition has not been conclusively proven.

The issue may soon be explored in the courts. A coalition of conservation and health groups plans to sue the California Fish and Game Commission to stop the use of lead ammunition.

The Center for Biological Diversity, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and the Wishtoyo Foundation, along with some hunters served a 60-day notice of intent July 11 to sue the commission.

"Lead ammunition is the major threat to condors that hasn't been addressed," said Jeff Miller, spokesman for the CBD. "More than three-quarters of the condors released in Southern California have been exposed to acute levels of lead poisoning."

Lead ammunition fragments upon impact, scattering microscopic particles throughout the game, Miller said. Condors can mistake those bullet bits for bone fragments.

"As long as lead continues to be available, the chance of the recovery program being successful is very small," Miller said

The largest flying land bird in North America, the condor is a bald-headed vulture with a wing span of up to 9 feet. Teetering on the brink of extinction, the last 22 birds were rounded up in 1982 for a multimillion dollar captive-breeding program. Since the mid-1990s, they have gradually been released into the wild.

According to Jesse Grantham, California condor program coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there are currently 298 condors, both captive and wild, with release sites in California, Arizona, and Baja California, Mexico.

"There are about 56 flying free in California," he said. "The birds are scattered between the hills above Fillmore, up north through the Los Padres National Forest, to Monterey County." The Sespe Condor Sanctuary lies within the forest near Fillmore.

To counteract the lead problem, the recovery team places lead-free carcasses and calcium chips in the field in the hope condors will eat them instead of scavenging.

"It's clear that the commission has a responsibility to protect the condor under the federal Endangered Species Act and their refusal to do so violates the act," said James Birkelund, staff attorney for the National Resources Defense Council.

John Carlson Jr., executive director of the commission, said the agency stands by its hunter education initiative, which encourages hunters to voluntarily use lead-free ammunition and remove lead from their gut piles.

In February 2005, the commission denied a request by the CBD and NRDC to phase out lead ammunition for hunting of large game in the condor habitat because it "did not meet the requirements for emergency action," according to a meeting summary. At the time, the Department of Fish and Game was instructed to continue gathering information on lead contamination and report back to the commission.

"The issue is still pending," said Carlson. "The commission has not turned its back on this issue." He said the commission wants the best available science and will be receiving further information, analysis, and possibly recommendations from the department in 2007.

In humans, lead poisoning can cause brain damage, kidney disease, high blood pressure, reproductive problems and neurological disorders. Lead has similarly effects on condors.

"If the lead doesn't kill them, it impairs them," Miller said. According to the center, nine condors have died because of lead poisoning since 1997 and there have been up to 80 cases of lead removal treatments to save sick birds.

Lead has already been banned in gasoline, paint, water pipes, cookware and even shot for hunting waterfowl. But some hunters feel outlawing lead ammunition will curb their rights. Chuck Michel, media coordinator for the California Rifle and Pistol Association, an official state association of the National Rifle Association, said the lawsuit is "an oversimplistic approach to a complicated issue."

"They're focusing on what they perceive to be the condor problem and ignoring the environmental consequences of using alternative ammunition," he said. "There is no magic bullet." Advocates of nontoxic alternatives champion the use of copper, but Michel said copper is hazardous to the environment as well. He also noted certain types of gun barrels might not be able to handle the change in ammunition and that lead alternatives can be more expensive.



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