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Vote set today on lead ban to aid condors

BY PAUL ROGERS AND
GLENDA CHUI
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Citing studies that show lead poisoning threatens the recovery of the California condor, a coalition of environmental groups has asked the state to ban hunters from using lead bullets or lead shot in the areas where condors live -- roughly from the Bay Area to Los Angeles.

The five-member state Fish and Game Commission, appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, is scheduled to vote on the issue today. Thousands of letters, calls and e-mails already have poured in from supporters and opponents.

If the commission rejects the controversial request, as its staff has recommended, environmentalists are considering lawsuits, and perhaps an attempt at a statewide ballot measure.

Supporters of the lead ban -- pointing to the fact Schwarzenegger put the condor on the new California quarter coin -- say taxpayers are spending millions trying to bring back North America's largest bird. But since 1997, environmentalists cite that at least nine condors have died from lead

poisoning after eating dead deer and other animals that contain fragments of lead bullets. Dozens of others -- roughly one in three -- have shown elevated lead blood levels.

They note all 50 states banned lead shot for hunting ducks and other waterfowl a decade ago. And they contend that copper bullets work just as well, although they are more expensive than lead.

"Lead is an extremely toxic substance that we have sensibly removed from most of our environment, including water pipes, gasoline, paint and cooking utensils," said Jeff Miller, a spokesman for the Center for Biological Diversity in San Francisco, one of the groups pushing for a ban. "In the interest of protecting imperiled wildlife and safeguarding public health, the state should move quickly to eliminate toxic lead ammunition."

But many hunters are opposed.

They argue that lead bullets perform better than copper. And they support ongoing voluntary programs that encourage hunters to bury animal remains known as gut piles and remove dead animals, even smaller animals like squirrels and coyotes.

Lead is heavier than copper and flies truer, said Michael Riddle, hunting guide with Native Hunt Guided Adventures in San Jose.

"Another problem with solid copper bullets is that they don't expand," said Riddle. "They tend to go straight through the animal, and it increases the chances of a non-recovery. In other words, you have a wounded animal that wanders off and dies in the forest."

Every year, Riddle takes out roughly 200 paying customers on two-day trips to hunt for wild boar and deer on private ranches around King City, and to hunt for bears in Plumas National Forest.

"I would think that most all hunters would be very shocked to find they are looking at passing this," he said. A compromise, he suggested, might be a state law requiring the burying of gut piles.

California condors are some of the most endangered animals in the world.

With wingspans up to 10 feet and a daily flying range of 150 miles, they once ranged from British Columbia to Mexico. Because of habitat loss,

hunting and lead poisoning, they began declining around the Gold Rush and reached a low of 22 birds nationwide in the early 1980s. Federal biologists captured all remaining wild condors in 1987 and began breeding them in zoos.

Today the population of California condors has grown to 245. Of those, 113 live in the wild at Big Sur, Pinnacles National Monument near Hollister, Ventura County and the Grand Canyon. The rest live in captivity.

Mike Wintemute, a spokesman for the California Department of Fish and Game, said his agency will recommend that the commission not ban the use of lead bullets, and instead stick with voluntary programs.

He said state biologists know lead is poisoning the birds, but more study needs to be done.

“We don't know whether or to what extent lead ammunition used in hunting is responsible compared with lead used for other purposes or found in the environment,” he said.

But a 2003 report by the California Condor Recovery Team, which included a state Fish and Game biologist, concluded that “spent lead-containing ammunition is toxic and that it is finding its way through the food chain into the stomachs of condors. Once there it poisons them.”

The report recommended voluntary measures at first. Because of opposition from hunters to ammunition bans, such programs “provide the highest likelihood of acceptability,” it noted.