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Working to get the lead out

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The cost of hunting in the Los Padres National Forest could triple.

The California Fish and Game Commission will listen to arguments to ban the shooting of lead bullets in the forest in a Feb. 4 meeting at San Diego's Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute. The petition, made by the Center for Biological Diversity, was intended to help protect condors.

The lead in the bullets is toxic, and condors, which have been gradually released into coastal counties between Ventura and Monterey, are particularly susceptible to it.

The center is requesting that the commission phase out the use of lead-based bullets in the condor habitat, and eventually phase them out statewide. The petition was filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, Natural Resources Defense Council, Wishtoyo Foundation, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, Ventana Wilderness Alliance and individual hunters.

The switch to tin, tungsten, bismuth or copper-based bullets would about triple the cost of a hunting trip.

"We have to figure out what the problems are," Sonke Mastrup, the Department of Fish and Game deputy director of Wildlife and Inland Fisheries Division said in a seminar at the International Sportsmen's Expo at Fairplex Park. "We need to protect the raptors, and specifically condors. We need to do preliminary investigations."

The ban would be directed more toward deer and hog hunters because,

Mastrup said, condors are more inclined to eat from larger gut piles.

"We're not certain that they eat the lead bullets, but it is a very logical thing," he said. "There are also a lot of oil fields in the area, and for some reason, condors like oil platforms. There is a lot of lead lying around in the area. There is a lot of lead in those fields."

Condors need to eat bones in addition to meat. In a gut pile, they can eat bullets, mistaking them for bone fragments.

"Lead is an extremely toxic substance that we have sensibly removed from most of our environment, including water pipes, gasoline, paint, and cooking utensils," biodiversity research associate Jeff Miller said. "In the interest of protecting imperiled wildlife and safeguarding public health, the state should move quickly to eliminate toxic lead ammunition."

Non-toxic bullets can be just as accurate as lead bullets, and they are mandatory for waterfowl hunting.

"It is a more expensive bullet, and a lot of people cannot afford that extra cost," California Deer Association Southern California chairman Glenn Tessers said. "But, really what a lot of people are afraid of is that they're playing us against the anti-(hunters)."

But change would be good for the raptors, said fellow hunter David Clendenen of Bakersfield, who signed the petition.

"It seems to me to be just about cost," he said of those who are against the ban. "If you hear everything they say about lead, it's been banned from gasoline, from paint, you know that it's not good for you. It makes sense to me to ban it."

Clendenen, who manages the Wind Wolves Preserve in southern San Joaquin Valley, says he returned to annual hunts seven years ago. When he started again, he says he used copper bullets.

"Why would I want to poison myself, and my family and friends?" he said. "This stuff can hurt you, and you can miss (pieces of) lead. Plus, (copper) bullets do not expand and fragment as much, which means more meat."

Most hunters usually do not find themselves on the side of the Center for Biological Diversity.

"A lot of hunters don't like to be told what to do; they're in a comfort zone," Clendenen said. "They don't understand what it can do. I have my opinion and I'm happy with it."

Tessers admits a lot of hunters are unwilling to accept change.

"It's their psychology," he said. "Some people are just against change, and don't want the government to tell them to do it."

Mastrup says the DFG would like to at least study the issue before the commission makes a ruling.

"We would like to do some groundwork to see how to approach this," he said.

Arizona and Utah already have lead bullet bans in places where condors can be found.