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Petition filed for ban on lead ammunition and fishing tackle

By Paul A. Smith

Environmental groups Tuesday filed a petition with the Environmental Protection Agency seeking a comprehensive nationwide ban on lead-based sporting ammunition and fishing tackle.

According to the petitioners, “it is now incontrovertible fact” lead fragments are “a serious source of lead exposure to scavenging animals” and a health risk to humans who eat hunters’ kills. In addition, they claim numerous alternatives are available to lead.

The petition was filed under Section 21 of the Toxic Substances Control Act. The petitioners are the Center for Biological Diversity, American Bird Conservancy, Association of Avian Veterinarians, Project Gutpile and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

“It’s long past time do something about this deadly – and preventable – epidemic of lead poisoning in the wild,” said Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity in a statement issued Tuesday. “Over the past several decades we’ve wisely taken steps to get lead out of our gasoline, paint, water pipes and other sources that are dangerous to people. Now it’s time to get the lead out of hunting and fishing sports to save wildlife from needless poisoning.”

An estimated 10 million to 20

million birds and other animals die each year from lead poisoning in the United States, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

Sporting groups such as the National Shooting Sports Foundation, U.S. Sportsman’s Alliance and American Sportfishing Association have generally opposed such a ban.

Groups in the past have opposed such a ban as a thinly-veiled attack on hunting and fishing, as well as having little basis in “population biology.”

“There is simply no scientific evidence that the use of traditional ammunition is having an adverse impact on wildlife populations that would require restricting or banning the use of traditional ammunition beyond current limitations, such as the scientifically based restriction on waterfowl hunting,” said Steve Sanetti, president of the National Shooting Sports Foundation.

As an example, the number of breeding pairs of bald eagles, a species known to die from lead poisoning, increased 724% from 1981 to 2006, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

And although alternatives to lead exist, they are generally more expensive, less dense and in many cases, not feasible as substitutes, according to some sporting groups.

Changes to the use of lead in traditional outdoor sports are not unprecedented, though: Waterfowl hunters made the transition to non-lead shot nearly two decades ago.

And several northeastern states - starting with New Hampshire in 2000 and then Maine (2002), New York (2004) and Vermont (2007) - have total or partial bans on lead sinkers for fishing.

According to the petitioners: “There are now numerous, commercially available, non-toxic alternatives to lead. We are urging the EPA to develop regulations to require non-lead rifle bullets, shotgun pellets, and fishing weights and lures throughout the nation. Non-toxic steel, copper, and alloy bullets and non-lead fishing tackle are readily available in all 50 states. Hunters and anglers in states and areas that have restrictions or have already banned lead have made successful transitions to hunting with non-toxic bullets and fishing with non-toxic tackle. Over a dozen manufacturers of bullets have designed and now market many varieties of non-lead, nontoxic bullets and shot with satisfactory to superior ballistic characteristics – fully replacing the old lead projectiles. The Toxic Substances Control Act gives the EPA broad authority to regulate chemical substances that present an unreasonable risk of injury to health or the environment, such as lead. The EPA can prohibit the manufacture, processing, and distribution in commerce of lead for shot, bullets, and fishing sinkers.”

The Toxic Substance Controls Act requires the EPA to grant or deny the petition with 90 days of filing.