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OPINION

Real hunters get the lead out

By Paul W. Hansen

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It is time for those of us who hunt to quit using outdated lead bullets and start moving toward high-tech copper bullets – even if they are more expensive.

Lead bullets are bad for everyone: They contaminate the meat we bring home as well as the gut piles we leave behind, and they also poison any scavengers that consume the contaminated meat.

Moreover, the evidence against lead bullets is now solid. In a North Dakota study of 738 people whose blood was tested, those who ate a lot of wild game had higher lead levels than those who ate little or none. And the more recent the consumption of wild game harvested with lead bullets, the higher the level of lead in the blood. That is why the federal government now urges pregnant women and children under the age of 6 not to consume any game shot with lead bullets.

In Jackson Hole, Wyo., the Beringia South Research Institute has found that 50 percent of ravens have elevated blood levels during the hunting season, compared to only 2 percent during the non-hunting season. In the greater Yellowstone area, 85 percent of the bald eagles tested had elevated levels of lead in their bodies – more than half of them at levels that can cause impairment or death.

What happens after a bullet kills a big game animal is surprising. According to a Minnesota Game and Fish study, an average of 141 bullet fragments per carcass dispersed far from the wound channel, for an average maximum distance of 11 inches. That means that routine trimming of a bullet wound will not remove all of the lead. Because most lead particles in venison are too small to see, feel or sense when chewing, they're liable to be unknowingly consumed.

For centuries, lead has been known to be a broad-spectrum poison for humans and wildlife, and recently the Environmental Protection Agency described it as "one of the most dangerous neurotoxins in the environment." The young of all species are at higher risk because their growing bodies absorb more lead than adults do and their developing brains are more easily damaged by it.

Lead has been banned from paint, gasoline,

toys, and even tire-balancing weights. In 1991, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ordered a ban on lead shot for hunting migratory waterfowl. The agency took action because about 1 million to 2 million ducks, geese and swans were dying each year from eating spent lead-shot pellets. Now, the Wildlife Society – the professional association of the nation's leading wildlife biologists – advocates replacing all lead-based bullets used in the field.

Hunters already have alternatives. They can either buy bullets with no exposed lead – a heavy copper case surrounds the lead core – or they can buy a solid copper bullet that fragments very little and leaves no lead behind.

Hunters contribute a great deal to wildlife conservation through license fees, an excise tax on gear, the purchase of habitat conservation stamps and donations to wildlife conservation groups. Given this great conservation legacy, it makes no sense to contaminate our hunt by bringing home tainted meat or leaving toxic lead in the field. When informed of the problem, 90 percent of Arizona hunters in regions critical to the endangered California condor voluntarily switched to copper.

Unfortunately, this issue has become unnecessarily polarized. After making a well-referenced case for banning lead in the field, the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity then overreached by petitioning the EPA to ban the manufacture of all lead bullets. The group is now suing the agency. The lawsuit overreaches because most lead bullets are fired in target practice, which presents little hazard to wildlife or people. The issue is what happens during hunting, and that is where federal and state governments should take a stand and eliminate lead bullets.

This fall, I made a killing shot on an elk using the lead-core copper-case bullet. I found the bullet, with the lead core intact within the copper case. Advanced ballistics make these bullets very accurate and more likely to make a clean kill.

It was nice to come home and process the elk with no second thoughts about the lead I brought home, or left behind.

Hansen, a resident of Jackson, Wyo., is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News