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Lead removal action will protect albatross chicks

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This week, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its intent to begin cleaning up toxic, lead-based paint at federal facilities on Midway Atoll that kills up to 10,000 Laysan albatross chicks each year and also threatens the endangered Laysan duck.

The announcement came after the Center for Biological Diversity issued a notice of intent to sue the Service and affiliated agencies in 2010 for their failure to remediate the hazardous waste hurting the birds, in violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Endangered Species Act and Resource Conservation and Recovery Act.

The Service's action agreement authorized cleanup to begin this month.

The poison source is a decaying military base on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, part of the Papahânaumokuâkea Marine National Monument. Midway is the most important breeding site for the Laysan albatross. The U.S. Navy built its Midway base, later the site of a famous World War II battle, in 1903. When the Fish and Wildlife Service took over responsibility for Midway in 1996, it stopped maintaining most of the 95 military buildings. These structures are shedding toxic lead-paint chips that are then eaten by albatross chicks. Lead contamination also poses a threat to other Midway wildlife, including the highly endangered Laysan duck and 17 other species of seabirds.

"For too long the Fish and Wildlife Service has watched while thousands of albatross chicks died needlessly every year," said Shaye Wolf, a Center biologist. "The start of the cleanup this summer is an important step in protecting Midway's wildlife from lead poisoning, but it still falls short."

Deformed albatross chick Credits: Myra Finkelstein permission via Center for Biological Diversity

Last year, scientists reported that lead poisoning was killing up to 10,000 chicks per year on Midway; affecting the long-term survival of the Laysan albatross. Chicks near contaminated structures have lethal levels of lead in their blood. Many poisoned chicks have developed nervous-system damage called "droopwing" that leaves them unable to lift their wings, which drag on the ground and become susceptible to open sores and fractures, which could lead to a slow and painful death.

"Unfortunately, the Service has not put an immediate or permanent end to the problem," said Wolf. "The cleanup will not be completed for six to seven years and will not remove all lead-based paint, but instead encapsulate the paint, which requires frequent maintenance in the tropical climate. During the cleanup, albatross chicks will continue to experience horrific effects from lead poisoning for months before they finally die."

Protecting albatross chicks from poison is especially important now, due to recent catastrophic events:

The March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan killed an estimated 110,000 Laysan and black-footed albatross chicks — about 22 percent of this year's young — at Midway Atoll, where more than two-thirds of the world's Laysan albatross nest. At least 2,000 adults were also killed by the tsunami that washed over Midway's three low-lying islands.

The Center's 2010 notice challenged the failure of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Navy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources to abate and dispose of the lead paint that is harming protected seabirds.