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Wildlife Agency Needs to Restrict Lead Ammunition

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The Arizona Game and Fish Department sent out a bizarre press release last week attacking conservation groups while trying to defend the agency's abysmal record in protecting the Grand Canyon's endangered condors from lead poisoning. Game and Fish also tried out some scare tactics, claiming that protecting condors from unnecessary lead poisoning would somehow derail the condor reintroduction program.

The occasion was Arizona's effort to intervene in a lawsuit filed by conservation groups against the U.S. Forest Service for failing to control toxic lead ammunition left behind by hunters in Arizona's Kaibab National Forest. That lead ammunition is often consumed by wildlife, including condors, eagles and other raptors, and also jeopardizes human health. While Game and Fish trumpets the "success" of voluntary measures to reduce lead in the wild, the metric that matters is whether condors are actually protected from needless lead poisoning.

Here are the sad facts:

More than 30 condors have died of lead poisoning in Arizona since 1996.

More than two-thirds of the Grand Canyon condor flock has to be captured and given emergency blood treatment to save their lives from lead poisoning each and every year, causing all kinds of behavioral problems for reintroduced condors.

Condor biologists and the federal condor recovery program have repeatedly warned that condors will not recover unless the lead issue is addressed and lead is removed from the food chain.

It's hardly a record worth bragging about. And yet, Game and Fish makes the ridiculous claim

that groups advocating to end use of toxic lead ammunition do not participate in condor conservation efforts. These are the very groups working hard to protect condors in Arizona, Utah and California from lead poisoning, urban development, oil and gas drilling, inappropriate wind-turbine placement and poaching, and have consistently helped with condor conservation projects.

Game and Fish fashions itself a leader in condor conservation efforts, yet has consistently opposed effective protections against lead poisoning and authorized hunting that has caused collateral deaths of more than two dozen condors. This is the agency that in 2008 killed the only known jaguar in the U.S. at the time and opposed habitat protections needed for jaguar recovery; opposed reintroduction of endangered Mexican gray wolves and advocated for trapping and shooting as many wolves as possible; and opposed protections for Arizona's endangered desert nesting bald eagles.

The commission that oversees this agency passed a resolution opposing habitat protection for a broad range of wildlife species.

When it comes to ending lead poisoning from ammunition, Game and Fish claims that implementing hunting regulations would harm hunters. California switched in 2008 to mandatory non-lead ammunition for hunting in that state's condor range and hunters there have easily transitioned to hunting with nonlead bullets. There has been no decrease in game tags or hunting activity since those requirements for nonlead hunting went into effect.

While it is too early to tell if there is enough compliance with the new regulations to end the lead poisoning threat for condors in California, there have only been three lead-poisoning deaths of condors since the regulations went into effect -- and incidentally, eight condors in Arizona have died from lead poisoning during that same period.

In California, scientists also documented immediate reduction in blood-lead levels in golden eagles and turkey vultures in the areas with restrictions.

Hunting regulations exist to prevent depletion of our wildlife and prevent killing of non-target animals. They are a good idea: Sportsmen have been required to use nonlead ammunition for hunting waterfowl for the past two decades, saving millions of birds from lead poisoning.

It's time for our forests and wildlife to get the same kind of benefits, because ultimately no animal in Arizona should die from preventable lead poisoning.

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