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It's Time to Finally End Needless Poisoning of Wildlife



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You rarely hear about legislation advocating for lead poisoning, but that is what the so-called "Sportsmen's Heritage Act" would do. A misguided provision in the bill the Senate will vote on this week would actually prevent the Environmental Protection Agency -- the same agency that got lead out of paint and gasoline -- from stopping wildlife from being poisoned by lead.

We know all too well the damage the lead poisoning can do. Bullet fragments left in game shot by hunters are often eaten by scavenging birds like bald and golden eagles. More than 75 species of wildlife around the country are poisoned or killed by lead left in the wild.

The EPA can and should address these preventable deaths by applying the Toxic Substances Control Act, a well-established federal law time-tested at limiting our exposure to dangerous chemicals like lead.

The most famous victim of lead poisoning is the condor, an icon of the wild landscapes of the West and a feature on the California state quarter. Putting the condor on a coin was a symbolic gesture to raise awareness about one of the world's most endangered species, which is making a comeback in California -- despite pervasive lead poisoning -- after an intensive reintroduction effort.

In 2007 the Ridley-Tree Condor Preservation Act was approved the California legislature and signed by then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. California ended the use of toxic lead bullets for hunting in condor habitat, instantly reducing lead poisoning of our cherished wildlife.

It was the right thing to do. Secondary lead poisoning of wildlife is preventable by using copper and other

non-lead ammunition for hunting. And the scientists were right; condors could not recover until the threat of lead poisoning from spent hunting ammunition was eliminated.

As predicted by the California Department of Fish and Game, the new regulations requiring nonlead ammunition in California have not resulted in any decrease in game tags or hunting. Hunters in Southern and Central California continue to hunt all their traditional game using non-toxic copper rounds.

There is nothing sporting about using toxic ammunition that contaminates the food chain and inadvertently kills so many non-target animals. The ongoing toll of bald eagle and other wildlife deaths due to toxic lead poisoning is a national disgrace. It doesn't have to be this way. Nonlead ammunitions that perform as well or better than lead bullets are increasingly available for all hunting activities. Many hunters are already switching to copper or other nonlead ammunition, opting not to poison the food supply for scavenging animals or their game meat.

Lead exposure is also dangerous to our health, especially our children's. We have worked hard to get lead out of our air, water and food by banning or regulating the use of lead in gasoline, plumbing, paint, cooking utensils, toys, jewelry and candy. We were able to take these protective measures thanks to federal toxics laws that enable us to remove, reduce or phase out lead from products that could expose humans to health effects. It's time to do the same for our wildlife.

Don't fall for the hype; the move to get the lead out of hunting ammunition has nothing to do with restricting hunting or Second Amendment rights. It is about transitioning away from using a known toxic material, ending preventable lead poisoning of wildlife and reducing health risks for people eating lead-shot game.

The pro-lead-poisoning provisions need to be stripped from the Sportsmen's Heritage Act. They fly in the face of the true conservation heritage of sportsmen and traditional American hunting values, which are to conserve our wildlife and environment, not recklessly and needlessly kill.