

# Earth Island Journal

## California Poised to be First State to Ban Lead Ammunition

by Maureen Nandini Mitra  
September 11, 2013

Bill to phase out toxic bullets and shots that poison condors and other wild animals passes state senate

California may soon become the first state in the US to ban the use of lead ammunition in hunting. The state Senate passed legislation on Monday that would require all licensed hunters in California to use non-lead ammunition starting July 2019. Lead shots are the leading cause of lead-poisoning deaths of the iconic and critically endangered California condors, golden eagles, and many other raptors and wild animals.

Assembly Bill 711 — authored by Democrat Assemblymembers Anthony Rendon and Dr Richard Pan, and backed by the Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, the Humane Society of United States, and the Center for Biological Diversity — was approved by a 23 to 15 vote on Monday. The bill will become law once Governor Jerry Brown signs it. He has until October 13 to approve the legislation.



Photo by Sequoia Hughes

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“This is huge step forward toward protecting people and wildlife from lead poisoning,” says Jeff Miller, conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity, which has been leading a nationwide campaign, Get the Lead Out, calling for a transition to nontoxic bullets and shots. Ammunition, Miller says, is one of the largest unregulated sources of lead we put into the environment. “We’ve banned lead in gasoline, paint, plumbing, eating utensils, toys, jewelry, and even imported candy. Now we can get the lead out for our wildlife.”

An estimated 3,000 tons of lead is fired into the environment by hunters every year, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Another 80,000 tons is released at shooting ranges annually, and 4,000 tons is lost in ponds and

streams as fishing lures and sinkers. As many as 20 million birds and other animals die each year from lead poisoning after scavenging on carcasses containing lead-bullet fragments, eating lead-poisoned prey, or ingesting spent lead-shot pellets that they mistake for food or grit.

There have been numerous studies linking lead exposure to wildlife mortality. Recently, a coalition of scientists, doctors and public health experts from across the country called for a “reduction and eventual elimination” of lead-based ammunition in the US, citing a growing body of scientific evidence of the toxic impact of lead poisoning on people and wildlife.

Some regulations on lead ammunition are already in effect. The USFWS banned the use of lead shots for hunting geese and ducks in 1991, and in 2009 the National Park Service announced that it was planning on phasing out the use of lead ammunition. Thirty-five states already have partial bans on lead ammunition, mostly in wildlife refuge areas. In California, hunting with lead ammunition is already prohibited in eight counties that are home to California condors.

But environmentalists say the partial bans aren't enough since birds and animals don't always stick to specific areas.

This is especially true for California condors that can fly several hundred miles in a day. “We just lost a bird on September 4 that died during surgery at Los Angeles Zoo to remove lead from its body,” Steve Kirkland, condor field coordinator for the USFWS's California Condor Recovery Program, told me. He says another condor died of lead poisoning in June; and in July the necropsy of a condor

that died after hitting a power line revealed high lead levels in its blood. “It's possible that its health was already compromised before it hit the power line,” Kirkland says.

According to the USFWS' latest data, from July 2013, there are currently 220 California condors in the wild, spread across California, Arizona, Utah, and Baja, Mexico, with the majority of them (120 birds) living in California. The critically endangered species, whose population fell to 22 in 1982 before a captive-breeding program helped increase its numbers, are still very much at risk. Lead poisoning “represents about 50 percent of the mortality in the condor population,” Kirkland says. “So we believe this is the most significant threat to the recovery of the condors.” Kirkland cited two studies to support his claim. You can read them [here](#) and [here](#).

As a federal official, Kirkland isn't allowed to comment on the pending bill, but he did say that his agency has been “doing outreach promoting the use of non-lead ammunition and will continue to do so whether the bill is approved or not.” Kirkland says the condor program isn't anti-hunting or ranching. “Hunting and ranching are valuable food sources for scavengers. We respect the value of hunting as a conservation tool. It's simply that the use of lead ammunition in the environment is toxic to wildlife, and scavenging species such as the California condor are particularly vulnerable,” he says.

The National Rifle Association and other gun advocates are unhappy with the bill, which they say will lead to an end to hunting in the state. The NRA points to the fact that the 2008 ban on lead ammunition within the condor corridor has failed to reduce the bird's exposure to lead as proof that it isn't ammunition

that's killing the condors. It says that alternative sources of lead from "microtrash" such as coins, nuts and bolts and leaded paint are to blame for the poisoning, but doesn't offer any scientific proof that microtrash was the key source of lead poisoning in birds and animals. (The studies cited on the NRA website, huntfortruth.org, date back to 2004 and earlier.)

The National Shooting Sports Federation argues that alternative ammunition will not be easily available, will be expensive, and says bullets made of harder material like brass and copper would violate federal regulations barring armor piercing ammunition.

Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity dismisses the shooting sports federation's arguments as "ridiculous" and "complete fiction."

"There are literally hundreds of rounds of non-lead ammunition in all calibers currently in use for hunting — not a single one of them has been classified, or could be classified, as armor piercing," he says. He referred to a recent study on the price and availability of non-lead ammunition that found no major difference in the retail price of equivalent lead-free ammunition for most popular calibers.

"The regulations in effect for the past 5 years prove the regulations do not ban hunting, but allow hunting to continue exactly as before, but with non-toxic ammunition," he says. "It's a shame that the bill [if approved by Brown] will take six years to go into effect, but that's the provision the senate put in to make it more palatable [to hunters and gun advocates]."