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Conservationists renew push to ban lead shot

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Seven endangered California condors, but more likely eight, of a northern Arizona and southern Utah group have died since September, conservation groups and Arizona Game and Fish report.

Three died of lead poisoning, one hasn't been spotted in a long time, one died and fell into a very narrow canyon (its body irretrievable), one died of unknown causes and two others are pending necropsy to determine why they died, said Allen Zufelt, Arizona Game and Fish's condor program coordinator.

Further, 28 out of the 80 condors in this area have been treated for blood poisoning since September -- the largest proportion requiring treatment ever.

The camps agree on that much. They disagree on what to do about it.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club are redoubling efforts to press Arizona Game and Fish to ban the use of ammunition with lead in it in areas where the condors live and feed on gut piles, amid other animal remains, such as north of the Grand Canyon.

"We're not asking for restriction or elimination of hunting. We're asking for same hunting, same numbers, same seasons, same everything, just using non-toxic rounds," said Jeff Miller, of the Center for Biological Diversity. "... They could very easily go to non-toxic ammunition."

Of the 166 condors reintroduced in Utah and Arizona since 1996, at least 38 have been killed by lead poisoning.

Miller said he wants Utah and Arizona to follow California's lead, where leaded ammunition has been banned in a portion of the state for five years.

"It's clear that voluntary efforts to reduce lead ammunition use around the Grand Canyon aren't getting the job done. Given the wide availability, lowered cost and high performance of lead-free ammo, these states should admit it's time to switch and require nontoxic rounds for hunting," Miller said.

The groups released a letter signed by 30 researchers from the United States and other countries calling for reduction and eventual elimination of ammunition containing lead.

The local condor program coordinator for Game and Fish agreed that gut piles left over from fall deer hunting

appear to be a major source of poisoning for the birds.

“The reality is, the lead poisoning they’re getting is coming from hunters, from ammunition,” Zufelt said, citing the alignment of lead poisoning and hunting season.

He later released an agency-approved statement saying varmint hunters, cattle ranchers, and law enforcement could be an important source of lead exposure for condors.

But some 85 percent to 90 percent of hunters in northern Arizona are taking voluntary measures -- using non-lead ammunition provided free by Game and Fish, or removing gut piles.

“The voluntary program is working,” Zufelt said.

He said that Utah’s voluntary program to ask hunters to switch away from lead ammo is in its infancy, and that’s also a source of poisoning for these birds.

Game and Fish is saying it cannot ban lead bullets -- that such a move would violate promises made to hunters and the law.

“We can’t legally say, ‘We’re not going to allow lead bullets up there anymore,’” Zufelt said.