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Gov. Brown and California Must Lead the Way on Lead Ammunition

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Back in the 1970s, when a newcomer named Jerry Brown was making national headlines as California's young, progressive governor, the United States took the first steps to remove toxic lead from our environment by passing laws to phase-in removal of lead from interior paint and gasoline.

Now, four decades later, Gov. Brown can sign a bill -- A.B. 711 -- that will allow California to lead the nation in phasing out what leading scientists say is likely the largest remaining source of lead knowingly added to the environment in the U.S.: lead hunting ammunition.

As the governor considers signing the bill that will require sportsmen across the state to use non-lead hunting ammunition by 2019, he's no doubt very familiar with the politics of lead in this country.

Though we've long-known there are no safe levels of lead exposure, it's always taken a law to get the lead out of pretty much anything in this country.

Over a century ago, several European countries banned the use of interior lead-based paints, but with U.S. paint manufacturers continuing to assert the products' safety, it wasn't until 1971 that the U.S. began to phase it out.

There was strong evidence early in the 20th century that lead gasoline was causing the workers manufacturing it to become violently insane, leading to worker deaths and hospitalizations. But in the years before it was banned in the early 1970s, the industry fought off regulation, first by falsely asserting that lead was not a health risk, then by falsely claiming that although they had added lead to gasoline, they couldn't remove it.

Now, right on cue, extremist gun groups have launched a barrage of equally disingenuous claims about non-lead ammunition, despite the fact that hunters have been successfully hunting with copper rounds in 14 California counties for five years now since non-lead hunting ammunition requirements went into effect to protect endangered California condors from lead poisoning.

The research on the toxic damage lead causes in humans and animals is increasingly extensive.

Earlier this year 30 leading scientists, doctors and public-health experts from Harvard, Cornell, Rutgers and other universities around the country concurred that lead hunting ammunition should be phased out because it continues to pose a serious danger to people and wildlife.

Just last year, the Centers for Disease Control reduced by half the amount of lead in children's blood that triggers monitoring by health officials.

Though lead shot has been banned for waterfowl hunting since 1991, it is still in use for upland game bird and small mammal hunting, and the U.S. Geological Survey estimates that toxic lead contaminates some popular hunting areas at densities of up to 400,000 pieces of lead shot per acre.

Studies also show that lead bullets can contaminate game meat with toxic fragments and dust-sized particles, causing significant health risks to people eating wild game.

Bald eagles and other wildlife continue to be poisoned either from scavenging carcasses containing lead-bullet fragments or from ingesting littered spent lead-shot pellets, mistaking them for food or grit. Spent lead ammunition is known to poison 130 species of birds and animals. Nearly 500 scientific reports document the dangers to wildlife from this lead exposure.

Over the last four decades, federal regulations have been put into place banning lead from gasoline, plumbing, paint, ceramic eating utensils, toys, jewelry and imported candy.

And the evidence is strong that we are all better off for these regulations reducing toxic lead in our air, water and food: Monitoring showed that the Clean Air Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, and regulation of lead in gasoline and other products reduced blood-lead levels in American children by a staggering 84 percent from the 1970s to 1995.

Just as none of those improvements came without legislative action, lead bullets won't stop poisoning wildlife and threatening the health of our children until they're phased out by law.

As a scientist, a mom and a long-time California resident, I'm trusting that Gov. Brown will agree that right now, right here in California, is the right time and place to start

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