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Groups Press New York State to Ban Poisons That Kill Wildlife

By JAMES BARRON
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For years, wildlife and conservation groups have raised alarms that a class of poisons used to kill rats in New York has been indiscriminately killing wildlife in places like Central Park.

Now, relying on fresh evidence from post-mortem examinations conducted by the State Department of Environmental Conservation, six such groups are pressing for a statewide ban on those types of poisons. They say that too many other animals — birds and foxes, as well as dogs and cats — have died after eating rats that had eaten the poison.

Among the predators that ingested tainted rats and soon died, they say, was Lima, a mate of Manhattan's famous red-tailed hawk, Pale Male. She was found dead under a tree in the park in February 2012.

In filing a petition seeking the ban, the six groups cite necropsy reports prepared by the department itself documenting more than 225 poisonings dating back to the 1980s. Their petition says that such poisonings have killed animals from more than 30 species, including great horned owls, golden eagles and foxes, as well as housepets.

"These toxic products are poisoning the food chain," said Jonathan Evans, a lawyer with the Center for Biological Diversity, a San

Francisco-based group that is coordinating the petition. "They're having effects on upper-level predators that feed on small animals. We're poisoning the solution when we use these products for rodent control."

The center has been campaigning for regulations to reduce what it says is collateral damage from pesticides. A statewide ban on over-the-counter sales of the same type of pesticide took effect in California on July 1. In May, the federal Environmental Protection Agency reached an agreement with Reckitt Benckiser, the company that makes the pesticide d-Con, to phase out a dozen products that the agency said did not meet safety standards.

Mr. Evans said the center and the five other groups seeking the ban in New York — New York City Audubon; the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.; the American Bird Conservancy; Earthjustice, a public-interest law group in Manhattan; and Raptors Are the Solution, a California-based conservation group — obtained and analyzed necropsy reports from the agency they are petitioning.

He said their analysis showed that between 1989 and 2013, the pesticides caused or contributed to the deaths of a long list of birds and animals, including at least 50 red-tailed hawks, 47 squirrels, 36 great horned owls, 19 crows, 12 screech owls, 7 Cooper's hawks, 7 deer, 6 foxes, 3 golden eagles and 2 coyotes. He

cautioned that the numbers probably understated the problem, because they counted only animals that were found and tested.

The petition also cites a state analysis of 265 raptor necropsies from 1998 to 2001 in which 49 percent reported “detectable levels” of anticoagulant rodenticides. One pesticide from the class targeted by the petition was found in 84 percent of those birds, Mr. Evans said.

The petition seeks to ban what are known as second-generation anticoagulants. They interfere with blood clotting, which leads to uncontrollable internal bleeding and, eventually, death.

Mr. Evans said that second-generation anticoagulants accumulate and remain in the tissues of the animals that eat them. “Predators that then eat poisoned rodents,” the petition notes, “may ingest a toxic dose far beyond the amount needed to kill the rodent and be lethally poisoned from just one feeding.”

The parks department acknowledged in 2012 that the Central Park Conservancy, the nonprofit group that manages the park, had used rat poison until mid-2011, when it switched to snap traps in tamper-proof boxes. A Parks Department spokeswoman said on Friday that the current citywide protocol is to suspend the use of rodenticides whenever a breeding pair of red-tailed hawks builds a nest in or near a park during the nesting period, which runs from March to August. Central Park follows the same protocol.

But birders say most parks in the city are within easy flying range of buildings that generate trash that draws rats, and that put out pesticides to try to control them. They say the hawks could then fly to the park and die there.

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