



May 8, 2023

Kevin Shea
Administrator
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
4700 River Road
Riverdale, MD 20737

Martha Williams
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Department of Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Re: Expediting a Vaccine for the California Condor

Dear Administrator Shea and Director Williams,

The below signed 29 conservation and wildlife protection organizations write to raise our profound concerns regarding the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza (“HPAI”) that has killed 21 California condors in northern Arizona and infected many others. As spring migration peaks and the risk of transmission spikes, we urge you to use your emergency authorities to expeditiously deploy a vaccine to prevent any more mortalities of these critically endangered birds.

The United States is currently facing the largest outbreak of HPAI in its history. This extremely infectious and fatal form of avian influenza is spreading through wildlife populations around the world, and has now begun to spread to the critically endangered California condor. On April 9th, the National Park Service reported that HPAI had killed three condors from the Arizona-Utah flock. In just eight days, the number of fatalities jumped to 20, with an additional condor death confirmed late last week. These deaths account for 17% of the entire Arizona-Utah flock, which numbered 116 birds before the outbreak.

The rapid approval and deployment of a vaccine is needed to curb this outbreak and protect the condor. While there are currently no approved vaccines against the current strain of HPAI, a vaccine has already been approved for use in wildlife in other parts of the world. Even though the U.S. Department of Agriculture (“USDA”) is testing vaccines and expects to have results by June, every day of delay matters and leads to potentially more condor deaths. There is a vital need to contain this outbreak and prevent further spread among condor populations as spring migration increases transmission. These circumstances necessitate expedited development and emergency approval of a vaccine regimen to protect the California condor.

While animal vaccines require a license of approval from the USDA, special licenses under expedited consideration may be granted to meet an emergency condition.¹ The ongoing threat to the California condor is clearly an emergency warranting such consideration, and the USDA’s own HPAI response plan cites “risk of infection of valuable, rare, or endangered nondomestic

¹ 21 U.S.C. § 154a; 9 C.F.R. § 102.6.

species” as a criterion warranting emergency vaccination.² Vaccination has historically played a critical role in protecting the California condor, as many birds were vaccinated against West Nile Virus in 2003, potentially saving this species from deadly infection and possible extinction.³ However, the California condor is at risk of extinction once again, and once again, an emergency vaccination campaign is required to stave off a deadly infection and possible extinction.

We are encouraged that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is coordinating with partners across the condor’s range to address the unfolding threat of HPAI, but more is needed to prevent the extinction of the California condor. We therefore urge the rapid development, emergency approval, and swift deployment of a vaccine against the current HPAI strain jeopardizing the existence of the endangered California condor. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you would like to further discuss this matter.

Sincerely,



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American Bird Conservancy
Animal Welfare Institute
Center for Biological Diversity
Christian Council of Delmarva
Climate Hawks Vote
Coastal Plains Institute
Coastal Plains Institute
Endangered Habitats League
Endangered Species Coalition
Environmental Protection Information Center – EPIC
Fly Fishers International
Green Art Labs
Harris Center for Conservation Education
Humane Action Pennsylvania
Humane Action Pittsburgh
Humane Society Legislative Fund
Los Angeles Audubon Society
NH Audubon
North Central Washington Audubon Society

² USDA, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Response Plan at 5-49 (2017) available at: https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/emergency_management/downloads/hpai_response_plan.pdf.

³ *Condors Responding Well to Vaccine* (Jul. 7, 2004) <https://www.deseret.com/2004/7/20/19840813/condors-responding-well-to-vaccine>.

Northern California Council,
Oceanic Preservation Society
Planning and Conservation League
Primate Conservation Inc.
Project Coyote
Resource Renewal Institute
Sierra Club
The Humane Society of the United States
The Urban Wildlands Group
WildEarth Guardians