Get the lead out: Wildlife advocates file suit to replace toxic ammo with safer alternatives

Simple, practical steps called for to protect endangered California Condor

Anon.

A broad coalition including hunters, Native Americans, and health and conservation organizations filed suit today against the California Fish and Game Commission and Department of Fish and Game for continuing to allow toxic lead ammunition that is poisoning rare California Condors even though safe, reliable bullets and shot are readily available. The Wishtoyo Foundation, Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and Center for Biological Diversity, along with representatives from the hunting community, brought suit under the federal Endangered Species Act.

"The safety of our families and healthy wildlife are important to hunters across California," said Anthony Prieto, a hunter and plaintiff in the case. "There's a simple solution that lets hunters hunt while protecting condors, eagles and other wildlife; it's lead-free ammo. I know from experience that these bullets are safe and ballistically outperform bullets made from lead."

The California Condor is one of the most imperiled animals in the world. They were so close to extinction that, in 1982, the last 22 wild birds were rounded up as part of a captive-breeding program. The government began releasing condors back into the wild in 1992. Of the 127 condors released in California from 1992 through July 2006, 46 birds (36 percent) have already died or disappeared and are presumed dead. Scientists say poisoning from lead ammunition is likely responsible for many of the deaths.

Condors are exposed to lead when they encounter carcasses or the remains of animals cleaned by hunters in the field. Microscopic lead particles are widespread throughout game shot with lead ammunition. Condors also can mistake bullet fragments for the calcium-rich bone they require. The birds absorb the toxic metal more quickly than other raptors and expel it less efficiently.

"Condors are critical to our culture and to our religion," said Mati Waiya, a Chumash ceremonial leader and the executive director of the Wishtoyo Foundation, a Native American organization in central California. "But they will not survive so long as we continue to allow them to be poisoned by lead. We can solve this with the use of safe and effective non-toxic ammunition that will allow hunters to continue their activities and, at the same time, protect condors."

Bullets made from copper and other materials are widely available for hunting big game and perform as

well or better than lead ammunition. Non-lead ammunition also is safer for hunters and their families, or anyone who eats game, which often contains shot or small metal fragments. Lead is an extremely toxic element that can cause brain damage, kidney disease, high blood pressure, and numerous reproductive and neurological disorders. It has been banned in plumbing, paint and cookware for many years. "My mother fell ill earlier this year after accidentally ingesting lead fragments in venison from a deer that I shot," said Leif Bierer, another hunter and plaintiff. "This is a real threat to hunters and their families." One Canadian study found that ammunition used to harvest wild game is a major source of lead exposure in Native American communities. "People eating meat from animals taken with lead ammunition often have unhealthy lead levels in their own bodies," said Jonathan Parfrey, executive director for PSR.

Federal law already requires the use of non-lead shot when hunting waterfowl due to widespread lead poisoning of waterfowl and secondary poisoning of eagles. Lead poisoning of loons, swans, upland game and the continued poisoning of eagles prompted additional restrictions on lead shot and lead fishing tackle in national parks, national wildlife refuges and on public lands in many states.

Recently, the commission indicated it might consider regulating lead ammunition in condor country. NRDC attorney James Birkelund welcomed that news, but he noted that "it's been two years since we petitioned the commission for urgent action, and the poisoning continues. Time is short, and condors need more than good intentions." "The evidence is conclusive – lead poisoning from ammunition is the single greatest obstacle to the recovery of wild California Condors," said Jeff Miller with the Center for Biological Diversity. "If we want condors to survive, we must stop poisoning their food supply."

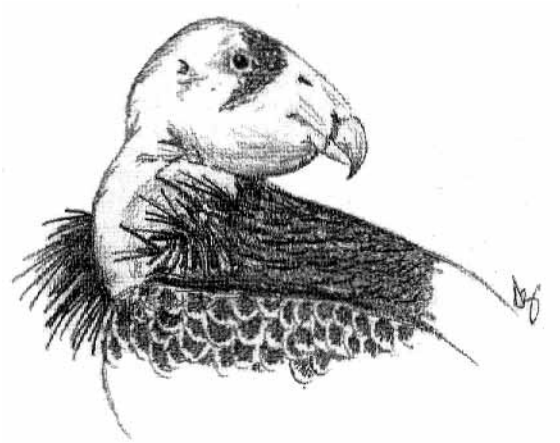
More information about condors and the lead poisoning threat can be found at www.savethecondors.org.

The Wishtoyo Foundation is a Native American organization that utilizes traditional Chumash cultural values and practices to foster environmental awareness. The Wishtoyo Foundation and Chumash elders have a strong cultural interest in the recovery of the California Condor, as evidenced by the condor pictographs, condor ceremonies, condor dances, condor songs, and condor prayers of the Chumash people. More information about the Wishtoyo Foundation is available at www.wishtoyo.org.

Physicians for Social Responsibility (www.psr.org) is a leading public policy organization with 24,000 members representing the medical and public health professions and concerned citizens, working together for nuclear disarmament, a healthful environment, and an end to the epidemic of gun violence.

The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, non-profit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has more than 1.2 million members

and online activists nationwide served from offices in New York, Washington, Santa Monica and San Francisco. More information about NRDC is available through its Web site: www.nrdc.org.

The Center for Biological Diversity (www.biologicaldiversity.org) is a national non-profit conservation organization with more than 25,000 members dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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Center for Biological Diversity
30 November 2006