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Feds: No lead bullets, please

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Hunters participating in elk and bison hunts in Grand Teton National Park and on the National Elk Refuge will be asked to voluntarily switch to non-lead bullets this fall, according to officials from both agencies.

The announcement comes after several studies, including one study conducted in Jackson Hole, have shown that scavengers such as condors, eagles and ravens have higher blood-lead levels during hunting season than during the rest of the year. Scientists think that the scavengers are eating bullet fragments in carcasses left behind by hunters.

"There's been more and more discussion, even nationally, about the use of non-lead rifle ammunition," said National Elk Refuge manager Steve Kallin. "We believed it was only prudent to inform hunters on the refuge and in the park that there are some downsides to the use of lead, and that there are viable alternatives."

In addition to the effects on wildlife, Kallin said there is new research showing possible lead poisoning in humans who eat hunter-killed big game.

"We're not raising a red flag on human health impacts by any means," Kallin said. "That's beyond the scope of our expertise."

Kallin did say the refuge would provide interested hunters with internet links to learn more about lead poisoning in wildlife and humans.

Kallin said he has used copper bullets and found that they work as well if not better than lead ammunition.

"I've talked to a number of hunters that have used the copper bullets and they perform very well," he said. "I personally will not use lead again because I've been very satisfied with the copper."

Kallin emphasized the voluntary nature of the program.

"Our goal is to provide information to hunters so they can be better informed," he said. "We've encountered only support."

Grand Teton spokeswoman Jackie Skaggs said officials from both agencies considered the science and the public's potential reaction carefully before deciding whether to go forward with the program.

"We wanted to make sure that we didn't get anyone unduly excited or nervous about the project," she said. "We want [hunters] to know it's voluntary."

Steve Cain, Grand Teton's senior wildlife biologist, said research on the link between high blood-lead levels in ravens and bald eagles and hunter-killed carcasses by the Kelly-based research group Craighead Beringia South prompted park officials to take a closer look at the issue.

"[Eagles] had concentrations that are known to cause mortality," he said. "Anything that picks up dead animals or dead animal parts could be exposed to lead contamination." Animals such as bears, wolves, cougars, wolverines, magpies, and coyotes could also ingest lead by eating hunter-killed carcasses.

Cain said researchers aren't aware of any species of animal that is threatened on a population level from lead poisoning. "Given that, we're here to protect the environment," he said. "We do feel that we are obligated to make those activities in the park as environmentally friendly as possible."

Law enforcement and research personnel have switched to non-lead bullets for some activities in the park, including weapons certification. "Everybody in the park is exploring the nontoxic ammunition that is out there with the intention of converting totally to it soon," Cain said.

Bryan Bedrosian, project biologist for Craighead Beringia South, studied the link between lead bullets and high blood-lead levels in ravens and eagles for four years.

"We're definitely excited that the refuge and the Park Service are on board with trying to remove lead from the environment," he said. "Of all the ravens, bald eagles and golden eagles tested, there is a clear trend for increased lead ingestion during hunting season. Ultimately, it can cause death, if not decreased reproductive success or lifespan."

Bedrosian pointed to research looking at lead contamination in humans.

"Even microscopic pieces that a normal person couldn't see or detect could be potentially harmful to wildlife that ingests it, or people for that matter," he said. "People can not only clean up the environment but they can also reduce the health risks to themselves or their families."

Bedrosian said if the park and the refuge get widespread compliance with the program, it could lead to further studies to see if blood-lead levels drop during hunting season.

Louise Lasley, public lands director for the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, praised the voluntary move to nontoxic bullets.

"I am pleased to see these two agencies involved with big game hunting take this step," she said. "I think this concern about lead bullets and measures to protect their impact on all wildlife will spread across the nation."

Officials with the National Rifle Association and the Wyoming chapter of Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife did not return calls for comment.

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