

4 May 2015

Rep. David L Dean,
Chair of the Vermont House Fish, Wildlife and Water Resources Committee

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am submitting testimony in support of H 460, which would require the use of non-toxic ammunition for hunting in Vermont.

As I write today, I am wearing several hats. One is that of a lifelong outdoorsman. One is my role as a health professional. And one is my role as a scientist who has spent over 40 years in wildlife and environmental conservation, and 30 years studying health and disease in wildlife in New England. I am an Associate Professor of Wildlife Medicine at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, and former director of both Tufts Wildlife Clinic, and Tufts Center for Conservation Medicine. I currently teach in several Tufts graduate programs including Wildlife Medicine, Conservation Medicine, and Public Health.

Since 1987 my students and I have performed necropsies (post-mortem examinations) on thousands of wild birds from Vermont and other New England states, often at the behest of state and federal fish and wildlife agencies. Our work has documented a wide variety of causes of injury and death in native wild birds including disease, predators, and human caused problems (including boat and car hits, gunshot, entanglement, oil spills, etc.). But we can unequivocally say that one of the most common causes of debility and death in a wide variety of species is lead poisoning. In many wildlife species, there is absolutely no doubt that the source of the lead is from the ammunition used to hunt both small and large game. Existing data support the importance of the proposed legislation. For example, our 2013 study demonstrated that nearly 15% of bald eagle mortalities in the region were from ingestion of lead that they obtained when scavenging the bodies of animals that had been shot (Mierzykowski, SE, CS Todd, MA Pokras and RD Oliveira. 2013. Lead and Mercury Levels in Livers of Bald Eagles Recovered in New England. US Fish and Wildlife Service. Maine Field Office. Special Project Report: FY13-MEFO-2-EC).

As a life-long outdoors person, I deeply appreciate that sportsmen (and women) have a long and distinguished history as committed conservationists in Vermont and the rest of the U.S. Hunters and anglers play important roles in protecting the biodiversity and health of our natural ecosystems. I say this, because it is very important to understand that most proponents of this bill are NOT anti-hunting or anti-sportsmen. But we are asking hunters, as concerned conservationists, to join in taking this important step in adapting their practices and equipment for the good of protecting the environment and the species we all cherish. Nearly 30 years ago, waterfowl hunters took a similar step when they changed from using toxic lead shot to non-toxic products. At that time, concerns were expressed about the cost and performance of the non-toxic alternatives, but hunters all over the U.S. successfully made the change. Now we're asking other

hunters to take a similar step.

Finally, as a health professional I feel that it is important to emphasize that for both human and veterinary medicine, there is scientific consensus that lead is profoundly toxic. No level of exposure is considered safe for people, domestic animals or wildlife species. Whether the lead comes from paint, gasoline, industrial processes or sporting goods, this metal is toxic and cumulative. The websites and publications of such agencies as the CDC, OSHA, US EPA, US Fish & Wildlife Service, USGS and many others emphasize the toxicity of lead. Shouldn't we ask ourselves if there ANY reason to put large amounts of such a long-acting, persistent poison into our environment?

Conclusion

From our years of work I can categorically state that lead toxicosis from ingestion of hunting ammunition is a serious problem for wildlife in Vermont and the rest of New England. This problem is not limited to New England. I am in frequent contact with biologists studying wildlife mortalities in New York, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington California, Arizona, and southern Canada, and can testify to the consistency of their findings and ours over time. To maintain the health of sportsmen, the public, and the wildlife that we all value, it is important that we adopt non-toxic alternatives for all of our hunting and shooting activities.

Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you might have via email or telephone.

Sincerely,

Mark Pokras

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