

California Condor Non-Lead Ammunition Communication Project

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Endangered California Condors have all sorts of unavoidable obstacles to survival, from predatory coyotes to finding tasty carrion. But the issue driving the species to the brink of extinction is actually one that is completely avoidable—lead poisoning from ingested ammunition. Now researchers are looking for ways to help condors survive by changing human behavior.

Utah State University (USU) is partnering with Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) to develop a science-based strategic communication program to increase the use of non-lead ammunition among hunters in the condor range of Utah. This coming year, USU researchers Zach Miller, Jordan Smith, and Jake Richards will be collecting data from Utah hunters to determine what drives or hinders the use of non-lead ammunition.

The leading cause of mortality in California Condors is lead poisoning, which occurs when condors ingest lead-based ammunition left in carcasses. As a critically endangered species with approximately 90 individuals in the southwest region, increasing the adoption of non-lead ammunition is essential to the recovery of this species. Currently, UDWR uses communication and incentive programs to encourage hunters to voluntarily adopt non-lead ammunition when hunting big game in the condor range. Post-hunt surveys show that approximately 60% of Utah hunters used non-lead ammunition in the condor

range in 2016. The goal of the UDWR and Utah State researchers is to increase this to 85% in the years ahead.

Communication strategies developed without science-based information often have limited effectiveness. Numerous studies show that science-based strategic communication frameworks increase the effectiveness of messaging. The project, led by the Utah State team, will identify communication sources used by hunters in the state's condor range, identify the drivers of their behavior, and identify relevant beliefs held by hunters in the region. These data will be used to develop communication strategies to increase the proportion of Utah hunters using non-lead ammunition, and further encourage condor recovery.

Background information on California Condors and the recovery effort in Utah and the southwestern U.S. can be found [here](#) and [here](#).