

Brussels – 4th February 2016

European Commission fails to ban toxic ammunition

The European Commission has announced it will continue allowing the use of lead in ammunition, despite the chemical being responsible for thousands of bird deaths.

Lead ammunition use will be regulated on a limited basis under the EU chemicals regulation REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals)^[1]. Under this, the use of lead in ammunition can be banned completely through a so-called “restriction process”. Sadly the Commission has only chosen to focus on lead in wetlands, where a ban is already supposed to have been in place for many years.

In taking this course of action, the Commission is ignoring evidence of damage done by lead shots in other habitats and by rifle ammunition.

Lead is highly toxic to birds and people alike. A review by the University of Oxford^[2] found that 50,000 to 100,000 birds in the UK alone die of lead poisoning. Ducks and waders often mistake lead shot (small bullets) for grit (the stones they eat to help with digestion) and die a slow and painful death from the toxic effects.

Throughout the EU there are also frequently major cases of lead poisoning of raptors. One example is the poisoning of White-tailed Eagles, which eat carcasses containing lead bullets every autumn^[3].

The UN Convention on Migratory Species, which the EU has signed, has called on its signatories to phase out all lead ammunition within three years^[4]. Several EU Member States, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, have already done so. Partial bans have been proven to be ineffective and unenforceable. In the UK, for example, lead shot has been banned in wetlands only, but investigations showed that as many as 70% of the ducks shot in England^[5] still contained lead shot^[2].

Ariel Brunner, Head of Policy at BirdLife Europe and Central Asia, said: *“The case for a complete ban of lead ammunition in the EU is crystal clear. The Commission should protect its wildlife and citizens from poisoning and meet its obligations under the Convention on Migratory Species.*

“Alternatives to lead ammunition, such as steel shot and modified bullets, are readily available and there is no reason to delay banning lead in ammunition.”

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Notes:

[1] – Risk Management Option Analysis Conclusion Document -
<http://echa.europa.eu/documents/10162/37b11f8f-b5c0-4ed4-b096-33807d5bb7b3>

[2] – Oxford Lead Symposium - <http://oxfordleadsymposium.info/>

[3] - White-tailed Eagles and other raptors and vultures eat the carcasses of game species such as wild boar. Many wild boars that get shot do not die straight away and are not found by hunters. When scavenging on the carcasses of these species, raptors often ingest fragments of lead ammunition and die of lead poisoning. More information can be found in the link under point 2 above.

[4] – Guidelines to Prevent the Risk of Poisoning to Migratory Birds -
<http://www.cms.int/en/document/guidelines-prevent-risk-poisoning-migratory-birds-unepcmscop11doc2312annex2>

[5] – Figures excludes Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

BirdLife Europe is a Partnership of nature conservation organisations in 47 countries, including all EU Member States, and a leader in bird conservation. Through its unique local to global approach BirdLife Europe delivers high impact and long term conservation for the benefit of nature and people.