

## ***Bridging the Divide: Non-Lead Ammunition Efforts Focus on Collaboration***

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Dating back centuries, to at least the 1500s, lead has been utilized in ammunition. Its inherent qualities — low melting point, malleability, and cost-effectiveness — established it as a dominant component in ammunition production to this day.

Recent decades of studies, and a deeper understanding of lead-based ammunition's impact on wildlife have sparked a movement to better inform the public. This effort aims to forge partnerships with diverse allies, promoting awareness and empowering hunters to make informed decisions.

Leland Brown, the program manager with the Oregon Zoo's Lead-free Hunting Oregon and co-founder of the North American Lead-free Partnership, provided a presentation on this subject at the 2025 Association for Conservation Information conference. He spoke on the historic significance of lead in ammunition production, as well as the importance of working with sportspeople and organizations to change approaches to lead-based ammunition use.

While the toxicity of lead has been known for centuries, it wasn't until the 1970s that steps were made to ban the material from household products. In 1991, the United States implemented a nationwide ban on lead-based ammunition use for hunting waterfowl, after studies showed significant long-term effects on bird and raptor populations.

Despite decades of research and bans on some use of lead-based ammunition, Brown said that there is still significant resistance from hunters regarding full-scale bans and regulations. Efforts on the state government levels, such as full bans proposed in California, were met with significant opposition, resulting in high levels of conflict and decreased trust between stakeholders. In contrast, voluntary programs in Arizona and Utah have shown high levels of participation and positive perceptions by hunters taking action to conserve non-game wildlife.

Key factors in the resistance include concerns on the increase in price, concerns about poor performance, difficulty finding ammunition, and ultimately, worries about reducing accessibility to hunting. The challenges encountered by legislative bans and the positive reception of voluntary efforts helped further highlight the need for a collaboration rather than regulation for lead-free ammunition use.

Formed in 2017 by the Oregon Zoo, the Peregrine Fund, and the Institute for Wildlife Studies, the North American Lead-free Partnership works to increase awareness and support for a voluntary use of lead-free ammunition or other best management practices.

By fostering a partnership that included hunters, scientists, researchers, and non-hunters, Brown explained the conversation shifted from debate to collaboration, focusing on realistic solutions.

The partnership includes a diverse gathering of more than 60 organizations, from state wildlife agencies to ammunition manufacturers and hunting and conservation groups. The key theme is finding a solution that allows for affordable hunting materials that bolsters conservation while still protecting hunters' interests.

"There is a lot of push for regulation - there is a lot of push for voluntary action," Brown said. "One of the things we do need to recognize is that there are choices, both in management decisions and in individual choice - that allow us to address this challenge in a productive way that is going to be durable across generations."

Brown said that in order to better work with the key stakeholders in the issue of lead-based ammunition, it was important to have a productive conversation with sportspeople who were resistant to the idea.

"There needed to be folks who care about hunting to help carry the conversation forward, and it needed to be led by hunters," Brown said. "We needed to work together with our fellow hunters to ensure they understand what the challenge is, and how we can potentially address this."