

Hunters: Please consider non-lead ammo

Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, like most federal refuges, allows some hunting and fishing.

But there's a problem with some of the ammunition used — its lead content. Just a sliver of ingested lead can bring down or do serious neurological harm to a bald eagle. There are at least four bald eagle nesting pairs at the Iroquois refuge.

Iroquois does not allow anglers to use lead sinkers or hooks, and it does not allow lead ammunition for duck hunting, but it still allows lead ammunition to be used for hunting bigger game like deer.

Lead ammunition has been used for centuries and remains common in hunting. However, there has been growing interest in non-lead alternatives such as copper bullets to lessen human and wildlife exposure to lead.

I am not a hunter, so can't rely on personal experience, but I appreciate those who hunt and did some research on why hunters might want to continue using lead ammo.

Hunters like lead because it is dense and soft, providing reliable expansion and effective energy transfer. Many rifles are sighted in with lead-core bullets, and hunters trust the performance.

Lead ammunition is also generally cheaper than non-lead options. And it is available in nearly all calibers and load types, especially for older firearms.

Mandating non-lead ammunition could potentially reduce participation, which might impact conservation funding derived from ammo and license taxes. Not to mention possibly dampening participation by youngsters and beginners.

Lead ammunition is familiar to most hunters, boosting confidence in its performance. It expands well in muzzleloaders, shotguns, and handgun rounds that might not reliably open copper bullets.

I understand those concerns. I get it.

But on the other side of the ledger, there are serious ecological issues with lead ammo. Lead fragments in carcasses and gut piles can poison scavengers such as eagles, hawks, vultures, ravens, coyotes and bears. Lead toxicosis has been documented annually nationwide by wildlife researchers and rehabilitators.

Moreover, microscopic lead fragments can remain in processed meat. Lead is a neurotoxin with no safe blood level, and is especially harmful to children and pregnant women.

Lead accumulates in soil and water, particularly at shooting ranges and heavily hunted areas. Wetland and riparian ecosystems like the Iroquois NWR are especially vulnerable, which is the main reason it does not allow lead to be used in fishing equipment or for duck hunting.

Modern copper and copper-alloy bullets reportedly expand reliably, penetrate deeply, and fragment less. This can often result in cleaner wound channels and less meat loss.

While there are some who would prefer Iroquois NWR did not allow hunting at all, that's not an option under the federal laws that underpin the wildlife refuge system. The refuge system is designed for use by all, including hunters and fishermen.

Among the reasons for that is hunters are actually some of the best conservationists because they want to protect and preserve the land and habitats they use for hunting. Think Ducks Unlimited — which helped fund much of the water control system at Iroquois NWR — and similar organizations.

Reducing lead use better aligns hunters with that image of stewardship and can reduce high-profile wildlife poisoning incidents.

In addition, there are some rebate programs available from the state (see <https://huntersforeagleconservation.org/new-york/rebate-form/>) to offset the cost of non-lead ammo. At least 13 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System run by U.S. Fish & Wildlife have their own version of a lead-free ammunition incentive – <https://www.fws.gov/form/lead-free-ammunition-rebate-form> – including Iroquois's sister refuge, Montezuma. While Iroquois is not part of that incentive, adding it is a possibility since Montezuma and Iroquois are now under the same manager.

Voluntary non-lead adoption could also preempt future regulations that could turn out to be more onerous than necessary.

New York State Senate Bill S4954, sponsored by Sen. Peter Harckham (D-South Salem, Westchester County) prohibits the use of lead ammunition when taking wildlife on state-owned lands (e.g., wildlife management areas, state forests, forest preserves, state parks) and on land that contributes surface water to the New York City water supply. The bill defines “lead ammunition” as any containing one or more percent by weight. Its Assembly companion bill is A1089, sponsored by Assemblymember Deborah Glick (D-Manhattan), among others. The Senate bill remains in the Senate Environmental Conservation Committee, and its future is unclear. If passed as written, it would take effect Jan. 1, 2027.

Whatever happens to that state bill, it won't affect Iroquois NWR, because Iroquois is federal land, not state. But the point here is that there is enough concern about the lead issue to cause the Legislature to consider it.

As president of Friends of Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, I would ask hunters to not wait for a law or mandate to be enacted. Please consider abandoning your lead ammunition for something that is more environmentally friendly.

It's the right thing to do for the stewardship of land that we all can use.

Richard Moss is president of the Friends of Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, an all-volunteer nonprofit that supports the refuge. He speaks for the Friends group, but not for the refuge itself, which is run by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.