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Re: Colorado Amendment 83 (Constitutional Right to Hunt and Fish) and the Harms of Lead-Based Ammunition to Wildlife and Human Health

As a biologist who spent more than three decades on the faculty of the University of Colorado, Boulder, studying animal behavior, compassionate conservation, and animal well-being, I am deeply concerned that Amendment 83 poses a serious threat to future efforts to protect our state's wildlife, including the very serious effects of lead poisoning.

The science on lead poisoning is indisputable. Lead is a potent toxin, and there is no safe level of exposure for people or animals. Lead bullets and shot fragment on impact, scattering tiny particles through carcasses and gut piles left in the field. Eagles, ravens, and other scavengers who feed on those remains are poisoned and often die slowly and painfully. I would like to believe that if this happened to your dog you would be extremely upset and rightfully so. The animals who consume lead don't suffer any less than a dog or other companion animal.

The same fragments end up in game meat, eaten not only by hunters and their families but also by people who receive donated meat through food banks. Spent lead ammunition also contaminates soil and water long after a hunt is over. Effective non-lead alternatives are widely available, and waterfowl hunters across the country moved away from lead shot decades ago. The scientific case for eliminating lead-based ammunition is unambiguously clear.

Amendment 83 would make acting on that science far more difficult. It would protect hunting "by traditional methods" in the Colorado Constitution without ever defining what that phrase means. Any future restriction on lead ammunition, whether adopted by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) Commission, the legislature, or voters, could be challenged in court as a violation of a constitutional right. The amendment does allow regulation where it is necessary for "sound scientific" wildlife management, but that exception offers little reassurance. It never defines what counts as sound or the best available science, how much certainty is required, or who decides. Even with evidence on lead as strong as it is, if hunting with lead is treated as a constitutionally protected traditional method, discussion of lead restrictions at CPW would effectively be shut down.

The amendment's vague language also reaches backward: practices Coloradans have already voted to ban, such as bear baiting and steel-jawed leghold traps, could face new legal challenges on the argument that they were "traditional" long before voters prohibited them.

Decisions about how we share Colorado's magnificent landscapes with other animals should be guided by scientific evidence and open public debate, not locked into the constitution. Hunting with lead ammunition should not be a constitutional right. For the sake of Colorado's wildlife and the people who live alongside these sentient beings, I urge Coloradans to vote NO on Amendment 83.

Respectfully submitted,

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