

Date: March 4, 2025

The Honorable Brian Feldman, Chair

Senate Education, Energy &
Environment Committee 2 West Miller
Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: SB 634 – Hunting – Nonlead Ammunition, et cet. – FAVORABLE

Dear Chairman Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee:

I am a Licensed Master Wildlife Rehabilitator and Founder, President, and Executive Director of Owl Moon Raptor Center, founded in 2002 and located in Boyds, Maryland. Owl Moon Raptor Center's mission is to preserve and increase native populations of birds of prey through 1) rescue, rehabilitation, and release; 2) habitat protection, enhancement, and expansion; and 3) public education. Owl Moon Raptor Center strongly supports HB 471 phasing out lead or lead-based ammunition for hunting. Owl Moon admits over 600 sick or injured birds of prey into the center annually, with the goal of rehabilitating and returning them to the wild. Unfortunately, not all birds are able to be rehabilitated and over the years, we have seen many raptors come in suffering from the ill and often irreversible effects of lead poisoning. We see birds exhibiting signs of lead poisoning including depressed behavior, tremors and seizures, difficulty breathing and swallowing food, muscle weakness, dehydration, and liver and kidney damage leading to death. While there are treatments that can remove lead from the blood, rarely is this treatment successful in reversing the symptoms, and rarely can a bird with toxic levels of lead in their blood be saved. Lead toxicosis {poisoning} is a heartbreaking scenario to witness, and unfortunately, we witness it several times each year, primarily in Bald Eagles and Vultures (both Turkey and Black), but also in other raptors such as Red-tailed Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, Great Horned Owls, and water birds such as Great Blue Herons.

Based on testing in recent years, the majority of Bald Eagles and Vultures that Owl Moon receives into care have a measurable level of lead in their blood. This year, ALL of the Bald Eagles tested had lead in their blood. Wild raptors consume lead in the carcasses and gut piles left by deer hunters, and in other wild game and fish that have consumed lead or been shot. Wild raptors can also become toxic from lead ammunition in their bodies from being illegally shot. Research shows that any level of lead in the system will compromise the long-term health of a wild raptor, and the body cannot remove lead on its own. Thus, these birds, including eagles, vultures and most other birds of prey, will be increasingly unhealthy and in harm's way as the lead in their blood accumulates during their lifetimes.

The Chesapeake Bay Region is a treasured outdoor recreation area for hunters and fisherman, birdwatchers and photographers, and other nature enthusiasts. The Bay and its tributaries are currently home to water birds of all kinds, and to a robust Bald Eagle population, as well as a large population of White-tailed deer. Maryland's Eastern Shore and

Southern Maryland contain numerous hunting reserves, state parks, and other areas frequented by hunters during deer season. Having these two interests occur together should not unintentionally endanger predatory birds including the national symbol of our country.

Due to expense and other factors, not all birds admitted at Owl Moon Raptor Center are tested, but of the birds we have on record since we first began testing symptomatic patients in 2016, Owl Moon has admitted birds of prey, including 20 Bald Eagles, suspected of lead toxicosis. Of those, 18 were confirmed to have toxic lead levels by blood testing. Only one of the birds, a Red-tailed Hawk, diagnosed with lead toxicity survived and was released. The rest either died or were humanely euthanized due to severity of symptoms. All 18 that died were Bald Eagles. The majority of birds that are admitted with the severe symptoms of lead toxicity consume the lead while feeding on a carcass or gut pile that contains lead fragments, as evidenced by radiographs showing high density pellets or other lead ammunition in their stomach and/or intestines. Less commonly, radiographs of birds with symptoms of lead toxicity show lead ammunition in other parts of their bodies where the lead is being absorbed into their blood, such as in close proximity to joints in their limbs. These birds did not consume the lead but were illegally shot. Every year Owl Moon admits several raptors that were illegally shot. Our records show that since January 2014, we have admitted at least 35 raptors that were illegally shot by citizens. Of these, most suffered severe traumatic injuries rather than lead toxicity, but some had elevated lead levels in their blood and were symptomatic. Evidence shows that even slightly elevated blood lead can weaken a bird, and compromise its immune system. This would reduce a bird's chances of rehabilitation and a successful return to the wild.

I sincerely hope that the information contained in this letter will help the reader to conclude, as we do, that lead ammunition is a serious threat to the health of our wild bird populations, especially raptors, including our native Black and Turkey Vultures and Bald Eagles, but also other creatures, including humans, that consume deer meat and gut piles, or are shot. With all the alternatives to lead ammunition currently being manufactured, there is no good reason to keep exposing ourselves and our native wildlife to the risks of lead in our environment. Thank you for reading this, and please support HB 471 phasing out lead or lead-based ammunition for hunting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Suzanne Shoemaker', is written over a light blue circular background.

Suzanne Shoemaker, Executive Director
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