California Governor Jerry Brown has signed legislation that will ban the use of lead ammunition in California by hunters.

In approving AB 711 (Rendon), Brown withstood furious lobbying efforts by the National Rifle Association and some (but not all) hunting organizations, who had urged the Governor to veto the legislation. AB 711 was supported by a broad coalition of conservation groups, including the National Audubon Society and Defenders of Wildlife.

The lead ammunition ban doesn't take effect immediately. Instead, it directs the California Fish and Game Commission to implement the prohibition beginning no later than 2019, and earlier if practicable to do so. In the meantime, ab 711 requires the Commission to adopt implementing regulations by 2015, including the certification of acceptable non-lead bullets.

This legislation is most welcome and, indeed, long overdue. The pernicious, adverse public health effects of lead in the human and natural environments have been well-understood for decades. We've done an effective job over the years in eliminating lead from most media–e.g., in our atmosphere–with minimal adverse impact on the economy.

But lead ammunition continues to wreak havoc on many of our animal species. Particularly susceptible are those species–like the California condor and bald eagle–that feed on dead animals (carrion) that have in turn been shot with lead bullets or shotgun pellets. The consequential lead poisoning is often fatal to these non-hunted species, a number of which are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act or other wildlife protection laws. Spent lead ammunition also winds up in our land and water systems, where it can leach into surface and groundwater resources for many years.

Moreover, this environmental threat is totally unnecessary: ammunition from other metals, like copper, is already available. Indeed, gun experts tell me that copper bullets are ballistically superior to lead-based ammunition.

In enacting AB 711, California is not charting new ground. Several other states have banned lead ammunition for years, based on the same environmental concerns behind the new California law.

Kudos to the California Legislature and Governor Brown for standing up to the gun

lobby and approving AB 711. It’s high time to eliminate lead from our environment once and for all.