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08/05/2008 01:11 PM

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bcc

Subject Fw: Condor Blue Ribbon Panel Report Summary

History: This message has been forwarded.

FYI- the first response (that I have seen) to the Blue Ribbon report. We have also heard that staff at the Los Angeles Zoo, for example, have issues of concern (including the one regarding reorganizing the program to the RO). I would expect that we will see more of these types of comments.

thanks,

marc

----- Forwarded by Marc Weitzel/VFWO/R1/FWS/DOI on 08/05/2008 01:06 PM -----



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08/05/2008 12:51 PM

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Subject Re: Condor Blue Ribbon Panel Report Summary

Open Letter to the Members of the Blue Ribbon Panel:

I must respectfully but strongly disagree with some of the scientific rationale used in the preparation of your report. This rationale lacks the rigor expected from a committee of scientists. As a result your report loses credibility.

You conclude "that condors suffer lead poisoning from ingestion of spent ammunition in carcasses and gut piles upon which they feed sufficiently frequently to raise mortality rates well above those required for sustainability", that rate assumed to be 10%. Furthermore "The evidence on this point is overwhelming". This is what we believe happened in the 1980s and what would happen if the supplemental feeding program were to end, but it is not an accurate description of the present situations. For the birds released in California the evidence in support of this statement is somewhat less than "overwhelming". In fact there is no support at all; over the past four years mortalities from all causes have been less than 10%.

Yes, without the feeding program mortalities from lead poisoning would surely prevent recovery. Yes, there is a need for occasional emergency chelation therapy. And the microtrash poses a particular hazard. But as it stands this statement is egregiously incorrect, suggesting that you have not looked at any of the mortality data or any of the other data in the monthly status reports that Jesse Grantham distributes. I expand with some of the technical details below, after consideration of the perceived threat of PCBs.

The two eggs that failed in Big Sur this year both lost water at an abnormally fast rate, suggesting shell abnormalities. The shells await thickness measurements and SEM examination; the contents are being analyzed by the laboratory of the California Department of Fish and Game. In spite of many years of looking, I have yet to find evidence that any marine synthetic organic contaminant other than DDE has had an adverse effect on any avian species in California. Yet you refer to "contaminants" implying that something other than DDE has been active. You are concerned about "the long-term health effects associated with other toxicants such as PCBs", implying to the average informed person that such effects have been documented.

In 1968 my laboratory published the first paper on the distribution of PCBs in the global

environment, with many of the samples coming from coastal California. . After the conclusion of the DDT hearings most of my efforts in the early 1970s were devoted to ending of all uses of the PCBs. I am therefore hardly a friend of PCBs. I have been looking very hard for evidence of effects of PCBs on potentially sensitive species, but have found nothing that would indicate any threat to condors. From my perspective therefore - until you convince me otherwise - such a statement has no place in the planning for a scientifically-based program. Rather, it appears to me as an indication of sloppy and fuzzy thinking.

The mean ratio of the lead isotopes 207 and 206 in ammunition samples so far analyzed in Professor Smith's laboratory at the University of California Santa Cruz is 0.813 with the interval of two standard deviations about the mean 0.807 - 0.820. No doubt analysis of additional ammunition samples will find other ratios but at the present time ratios within this interval are the only basis for attributing an ammunition source to lead recorded in condor tissues.

Dr. Bruce Rideout, Head of the Wildlife Disease Laboratories of the Zoological Society of San Diego, has been reviewing the causes of all condor mortalities. Two of the California mortalities, those of Condors 132 and 175, are now attributed to lead poisoning on the basis of liver lead concentrations.

Ratios 207Pb/206Pb in the kidney and liver of condor 132 were 0.8048 and 0.8058, marginally below 97.5 % of the ammunition sampled, and significantly lower than the ratio of 0.8207 recorded in the bone. More than one source of lead is therefore indicated; I would find it very difficult to state on a witness stand that ammunition was the source of the lead that killed the bird, although I believe that this is almost certainly the case.

The death of Condor 175 was originally attributed to an attack by a golden eagle that was feeding on the carcass. A remaining portion of the liver was not analyzed at the time. Later, analysis of a bone sample at UCSC recorded a concentration of 6.3 ppm, equivalent to that in the bone of Condor 165 which died from lead poisoning in Arizona with about 16 lead pellets in its gizzard. The isotope ratio was 0.886, very different from that in the ammunition measured so far. These findings prompted analysis of the liver, which had a lead concentration indicating a lethal exposure. At the present time, pending analysis of more ammunition samples, we can not conclude or even assume that this lead had an ammunition source. The hypothesis that it came from microtrash can not be excluded.

Three condors, 170, 245 and 238, died at the Los Angeles Zoo after field tests indicated lead concentrations in the blood exceeding the capacity of the instrument and after the initiation of chelation therapy. There were no clinical symptoms other than the high blood concentrations. Very low lead concentrations were later recorded in the livers, indicating low body burdens. The most recent death, of 238, is attributed to renal failure associated with the kind of chelation therapy used. Until now the deaths of 245 and 170 have been attributed to lead poisoning, with complications associated with the chelation therapy.

Granted, some of the disappearances with unknown causes of death could have been caused by lead poisoning. Debilitation from effects of lead could have contributed to deaths. But we must distinguish between Science and Speculation. So far the scientific evidence limits the number of

California deaths attributed to lead poisoning to the range of 2-4 depending on the interpretation.

This approach is fully consistent with that of Dr. Stringfield in her testimony last year to the California Fish & Game Commission which documented the known cases of exposure that might have contributed to deaths. Exposure of this magnitude was in itself a sufficient reason to end the use of lead-based ammunition, even if the exact number of mortalities induced by lead could not be determined. Elsewhere in our testimony for ending uses of lead ammunition we stressed both the human health factor and the reality that no hypothesis other than an ammunition source could explain all of the data so far available on lead residues in condors.

But even the highest estimate of lead-induced mortalities would not bring the annual mortality to 10 %. Beginning in 2000 total mortalities in California have been 17, 13, 8, 22, 0, 2, 4 and 6% of the wild population including birds fledged in the wild but not including chicks in the nest, with two mortalities so far this year, a flying population of 82, and 8 chicks hatched in the wild.

Yes, this is an artificial situation, with supplemental feeding and treatments for lead and microtrash, but by your definition the population would be considered self-sustaining since 2003.

What went wrong?

Please bear in mind that you are submitting this report to the American Ornithologists Union, which maintains high standards of accuracy, academic integrity and scientific rigor.

There is still very much to be done to reduce the lead exposure. Not appreciated is the very large amount of poaching by lower-income people. The hunting is usually done at night, under conditions that do not always favor the recovery of animals that are shot. With pigs so abundant, how can we be critical? But progress in reducing lead exposure has been much much greater than we could have imagined only two years ago.

Some of your recommendations need to be implemented; your report will provoke the discussions that will lead to a better program. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

Bob Risebrough

----- Original Message -----

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Sent: Sunday, August 03, 2008 2:56 PM
Subject: Condor Blue Ribbon Panel Report Summary

On behalf of the American Ornithologist's Union and Audubon California, the Blue Ribbon Condor Panel would like to share a summary of their findings on the recovery efforts of the California Condor. As you may all be aware, the panel will be presenting their findings this coming Wednesday August 6th at 12:30 p.m. in Parlor C of the Hilton Hotel Ballroom in downtown Portland, OR. All of you are welcome to attend the presentation, which will be given by Jeff Walters, the panel chair. The full report will be posted online on Wednesday August 6th. The exact web address has not been determined yet, but I will send an email with a link when it has been posted. At that time, you may be able to access a PDF of the report directly by looking on the AOU Conservation Committee website:
<http://www.aou.org/committees/conservation.php3>

Thanks to all of you for your valuable participation in the Condor Program.

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