

Popular fishing tackle would be banned under new California bill

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A California lawmaker wants to ban most lead fishing weights, arguing they are harmful to wildlife.

Assemblyman Bill Quirk, D-Hayward, introduced Assembly Bill 2787 on Feb. 16. The bill would outlaw the manufacture, sale and purchase of lead fishing weights that are under 50 grams.

"There's no question about the toxicity of lead," Quirk said. "Weights of these sizes can be and are ingested by wildlife. These weights are also the most likely to result in human exposure from, for example, an angler clamping a (lead) weight onto the line with his or her teeth."

Opponents from the fishing industry, however, say studies that illustrate the impact of lead weights on animals in California are lacking and that a ban would financially cripple anglers and fishing guides.

Six states along with Canada have some form of a ban on lead fishing weights.

Quirk pointed to studies done in New York and New England that showed the common loon, a species of bird, was dying after ingesting lead fishing baits. A study published last year in *The Journal of Wildlife Management* [found](#) that 49 percent of adult loon deaths in New Hampshire resulted from the ingestion of lead fishing tackle.

In California, Quirk said autopsies of pelicans and harbor seals revealed the ingestion of lead fishing weights as the cause of death.

"I think the science is good enough at this point to act," Quirk said.

Marko Mlikotin, executive director of the California Sportfishing League, said a California-specific study of the harm caused to wildlife by lead fishing weights is

needed before Quirk's bill moves forward. Otherwise, the bill is a "solution in search of a problem," Mlikotin said.

The study on harbor seals only involved one harbor seal that died in 2004, Mlikotin added.

"We invite a scientific review, because at the end of the day, anglers are conservationists," he said. "California is not New Hampshire. It is not Canada."

Lead harms wildlife no matter where it is found, said Jeff Miller, conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity, which supports Quirk's proposal.

"Everywhere this issue has been studied, lead exposure has been significant to many species of wildlife," Miller said.

Quirk's proposal would increase the cost of fishing and have a "devastating impact" on the state's fishing participation rate and fishing license sales, Mlikotin said. Annual state fishing license sales have declined 55 percent since 1980, resulting in less funding for state conservation and hatchery programs, Mlikotin said.

"The consequences of a ban are significant for communities that depend on outdoor recreation for tax revenue and jobs," Mlikotin said.

James Stone, a fishing guide and owner of Yuba City-based Elite Sportsmen Guide Service, said the ban would hurt fishing guides who rely on smaller lead weights that usually cost about 30 cents per ounce.

50 grams is equivalent to about 1.76 ounces.

Alternatives, such as copper and tungsten weights, are not as cost-effective to use, with tungsten weights costing about \$8 each, Sacramento-based fishing guide JD Richey said.

"It would be a pain but not the end of the world to use alternative weights," Richey said. "I think most fishermen are conservation-minded as far as wanting to see the rivers clean and their favorite species doing well, but I haven't really seen hard data that these little weights are hurting anything."

Quirk said using more expensive alternative weights is a small cost when factored in to the overall cost of a fishing trip.

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The California Sportfishing League has launched an online petition and social media campaign opposing AB 2787. Mlikotin said the petition already has more than 2,000 signatures.

Lead fishing weights have previously [come under scrutiny](#) from California's Department of Toxic Substances Control, and state efforts to reduce lead in the environment are not limited to fishing weights. California began to [prohibit](#) the use of lead ammunition for hunting on state lands in 2015, and that ban will extend to hunting anywhere in California beginning July 1, 2019.

Shortly before President Barack Obama left office, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service moved to ban lead fishing weights on lands managed by the agency by 2022, but President Donald Trump's administration overturned that effort.

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