

U.S. OKAYS EMERGENCY USE OF BIRD-FLU VACCINE TO SAVE CALIFORNIA CONDORS

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A Californian condor, in the Bitter Creek Wildlife Refuge, California. | Photo Credit: Vivek Menon

U.S. officials have announced the emergency use of a [bird flu](#) vaccine to protect the California condor, a critically endangered and magnificent animal that has already bounced back once from the brink of extinction.

After finding a California condor dead from the highly pathogenic avian influenza in March, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sought the help of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, which granted emergency approval for use of the vaccine. Even since, more than a dozen condors [have died](#) from the bird flu, known as H5N1.

The department approved the emergency vaccination "because these birds are critically endangered, closely monitored, and their population is very small which allows close monitoring of the vaccine," the release said.

The deaths, all near the Arizona-Utah border, are alarming considering the world population of California condors was estimated at only 561 at the end of 2022. This includes 347 free-flying birds in three states and Mexico and 214 in captivity, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Before condors are vaccinated, the wildlife service will conduct a pilot safety study starting this month on North American vultures, marking the first time the vaccine has been tested on wild birds in the U.S., said Joanna Gilkeson, a wildlife service spokesperson.

Bird flu has killed hundreds of millions of birds worldwide, with the virus largely spread by wild birds that transmit it to poultry. The toll in the U.S. includes more than 430 bald eagles and some 58 million turkeys and commercial chickens; the latter were euthanised to prevent the spread of the disease.

While scientists work on poultry vaccines, commercial flocks for now are protected by other measures such as segregation, USDA said.

The California condor is one of the world's largest flying birds with a wingspan of up to 2.7 metres and weighing more than 9 kg, according to the California Department of Fish and

Wildlife.

California's population of iconic condors was nearly wiped out – there were only a few dozen birds in the 1970s – by hunting during the California Gold Rush, as well as by poisoning from the toxic pesticide DDT, and by ingesting lead ammunition

In the 1980s, all 22 California condors left in the wild were put into captive breeding programmes to save the species. Zoo-bred birds were first released into the wild in 1992 and in the years since have been reintroduced into wild habitats.

The programme helped increase the population to 161 birds by 1999 from 27 in 1987, the state department said.

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