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## Is it Time to Write Off “Doomed” Caribou Herds?

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Despite ongoing discussions between ENGOs and representatives of Suncor and ConocoPhillips, the multi-million dollar gas pipeline through the range of the endangered Little Smoky caribou herd will not be re-routed but rather is well on its way to completion.

The current status of the pipeline was made known in a recent phone meeting between representatives of both companies and ENGOs. The clearing of the right of way has been completed and the companies expect the entire project, including cleanup, to be completed by the end of April. Given the numerous requests made by ENGO groups and individuals for pipeline re-routing and deferral of activity, the companies have ignored these concerns and, in essence, have failed to do what is best for the remaining approximately 80 individual caribou of the Little Smoky herd.

How will this “business as usual” attitude impact the remaining herds? The evidence suggests that, for many herds, their future in Alberta appears grim. Dr. Stan Boutin, a professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Alberta, stated in a recent talk that he feels that many of Alberta’s herds, and specifically the Little Smoky, are doomed.

Given this view, should we write off some of our caribou herds? Would our attention and money be better spent on those herds identified as having a greater likelihood of survival? Before we answer that question I believe we need to understand why the caribou reached their current endangered status. Once we have a better understanding of these factors, we will have a better chance of determining our options for increasing their chances for survival.

We know that many factors affect the survival of caribou. Included among these are the following: (1) Fragmentation, loss and alteration of habitat from resource development. For the Little Smoky herd, “best practices” by industry are not enough and may come too late. New industrial activity must be reduced and even eliminated from these areas. (2) Predation. Due to changing a landscape, caribou have become more susceptible to predation, particularly from wolves. Caribou may suffer because they are not able to maintain the spatial/territorial separation from prey species, which may protect caribou from predators.

Long-term habitat requirements within caribou ranges must be maintained and even improved. But attempts to improve wildlife habitat will be futile if all other interests are not integrated and managed accordingly. In the case of the Little Smoky herd, although Suncor and ConocoPhillips have committed over one million dollars to the restoration of existing seismic disturbance in the herd’s range, their efforts may fail because of competing industrial interests in the same area.

To improve caribou management in Alberta, many companies are quick to point to government for a solution. Albertans must expect companies, as operators on the land, to take on the obligation and responsibility of ensuring that the integrity of our landscapes and wildlife are maintained. These companies should strive to constantly raise their standards of practice. However, government must have a strong policy commitment to protect the caribou and its habitat and recovery.

A good starting initiative would be for the Alberta government to implement the Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan. AWA supports the two goals of the Plan: 1) achieve self-sustaining woodland caribou herds and maintain the distribution of caribou in Alberta, and 2) ensure that the long-term habitat requirements for woodland caribou are met within Alberta’s caribou ranges. In order to achieve these





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goals, however, strong actions and commitments will be required, particularly for those herds identified as "at immediate risk of extirpation."

Furthermore, AWA and other ENGOs believe there a need for the formation of a provincial umbrella coordinating group for caribou with the full cooperation of relevant Alberta government agencies. To be effective, this committed multi-stakeholder group would provide strong guidelines and targets that would result in the maintenance and recovery of Alberta's caribou herds. AWA and other ENGO partners will be meeting with the assistant deputy minister of Fish and Wildlife, Mr. Ken Ambrock, later this month to discuss these ideas.

