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Questions Continue to Surround Little Smoky Wolf Kill

By David Samson, AWA Conservation Specialist

More questions than answers are arising from the Little Smoky wolf kill. AWA has learned that an estimated 34 wolves have been shot and killed from aircraft under the authorization of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD).

AWA believes a wolf kill on its own as a short-term strategy is senseless and useless if not combined with an immediate deferral of industrial activity in the caribou herd's habitat. AWA supports a moratorium on industrial activity as a fundamental short-term action in the Little Smoky region until a science-based longer-term strategy to ensure recovery of the caribou herd is in place (see *WLA* February 2006).

The figure of 34 wolves is an estimate only, as SRD will not reveal the actual numbers. SRD spokesperson Dave Ealey would not confirm the numbers of wolves taken in the cull, saying the province is "not doing any sort of a body count on this" (*Rocky Mountain Outlook*, March 9/06). That, of course, is not only ridiculous, but, if really true, is unprofessional and incompetent. Using the premise that at least half the herd, estimated at 140, would have to be destroyed in order for the cull to have an impact on the Little Smoky caribou herd, 70 wolves would have to be killed.

Ealey would neither confirm nor deny AWA's number, nor say how many they planned to cull. "We're not itemizing the number of animals that are killed as a result of the cull," he continued. "We want to be able to be sure that we have removed enough wolves to have improved the survival of the caribou in that area" (*Hinton Parklander*, Feb. 20/06). If SRD knows what "enough" is, they must know *how many* enough is. They are either keeping that number from the public or don't actually know, so the eventual total could possibly be higher. No other details about the kill have been divulged, including what is being done with the wolf carcasses.

In response to a letter from a concerned citizen, SRD said that predation is the primary cause of caribou mortality. Yet the Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan (2004/05) lists this as only one cause, not the primary cause. No mention was made of the significant impact made on caribou habitat by industrial activity, which was pointed out in the recovery plan as being a limiting factor on woodland caribou habitat, and by extension, caribou survival. Nor was the person told that the recovery plan states that the same habitat change occurring from human activity may be what is increasing the caribou's susceptibility to predation.

"It is unlikely that predation is the primary cause of caribou mortality, as the data does not support this," said Cliff Wallis, AWA past-president and member of the government's Alberta Caribou Committee (ACC), which was commissioned to create a caribou recovery strategy. "Killing wolves is just the easiest proximate cause to solve. Wolves are the symptom, not the problem, but they are paying the price. This wolf cull was done without the recommendation of the ACC."

The government-sponsored ACC committee appears almost as much in the dark about SRD's actions as the general public. SRD informed the same concerned citizen that "very limited-short-term wolf control is necessary as an interim measure as Alberta implements a total package of efforts to address landscape conservation and management."

When asked if the ACC had been informed of this "total package of efforts," Cliff Wallis said the ACC would "certainly like to be enlightened on this. The government has not committed to any new actions," he added. "There are lots of ways they try to mitigate, but this is what has failed for 14 years. Caribou are





still going down. It's not like they aren't trying, however; they are just trying things that we told them wouldn't work."

