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Alberta's Caribou Recovery Process Descends into Chaos

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It reads like a bad novel – complete with duplicitous characters, backroom shenanigans, and innocent victims – but sadly, it's not fiction. As the province's caribou herds continue their steep decline, the Alberta Caribou Committee (ACC), which was set up to plan their recovery, is in chaos. The scapegoat behind which government and industry are hiding is the rice-sized beetle that's eating its way through Alberta's forests, but the real culprits are only too human.

In 2005 the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) adopted the Caribou Recovery Plan, with a crucial exception: he rejected the recommendation of a moratorium on further industrial development on specific caribou ranges. Alberta Forest Products Association (AFPA) was a signatory to the Plan, but when the Minister rejected the moratorium, AFPA did an about-face and agreed with him. Dr. Luigi Morgantini, a wildlife biologist with Weyerhaeuser who had signed the Plan on behalf of AFPA, was irate: before signing, he had received a clear mandate from AFPA to endorse the Recovery Plan, including moratoria.

In a second flip-flop, AFPA reversed their support of another ACC decision. The West Central interim strategies, supported by all members of the ACC Landscape Team including AFPA, called for no clearcut logging for pine beetle control in caribou range. AWA recently received correspondence from Dave Kmet, director of forestry for AFPA and a member of the ACC, indicating that AFPA no longer supports this recommendation.

It's not only AFPA's duplicity that is jeopardizing the future of caribou. After agreeing with the ACC's recommendation for Level 1 control only (intense monitoring and selective cutting and burning of beetle-affected trees), SRD directed forestry companies to commence clearcut logging in critical caribou habitat. AWA opposes this practice, since data from B.C. indicate that caribou do not use areas that have been logged for pine beetle control.

According to Cliff Wallis, AWA's representative on the ACC, both SRD and industry say that so much forest is infested, they don't need to go into caribou range. "We've asked them to say this publicly," he says, "but they won't. Someone has to stop the madness and bring order to this chaos." Helene Walsh, boreal campaign director with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, concurs: "There are plenty of places for industry to log to try to prevent pine beetle spread, without going near any caribou range, and the AFPA members know that."

The position of AWA and other environmental representatives has been consistent from square one. "We have tried to do what we've been asked to do – implement the Recovery Plan," says Wallis. "But everyone else has been ducking that responsibility. Nobody is biting the bullet on long-term solutions. There's a long list of bad actors here."

In the interest of getting the process back on track, AWA is calling for the removal of AFPA from the Committee. "AFPA has not shown good faith, transparency, openness, or accountability," says Wallis. "We are saying to government that if you want this process to work, you have to get rid of the people who are standing in the way." Rumour has it that in high-level discussions behind closed doors, AFPA is pushing for the removal of all of the ENGOs from the Committee.

AWA is also asking for government to stop its Janus-faced dance. SRD's agreement to only a Level 1 cut and its contradictory directive to clearcut in caribou habitat sit uncomfortably side by side. We are asking





for a clear directive and for a speeding up of the process's glacial pace: more than two years into the process, only one landscape team has been established. AWA continues to be involved in the process for one reason: when the ACC asked the deputy minister if the clearcut moratorium was still on the table, he responded affirmatively, saying that some companies have already deferred some harvesting to protect caribou range.

In its defence, the Alberta government claims that it is trying numerous tactics to help caribou, such as requiring industry to restore linear disturbances, culling wolves to reduce predation, and patrolling highways to reduce caribou-vehicle collisions. Experts agree, however, that these are all simply fiddling while Rome burns. What is needed is habitat protection for this sensitive species.

It's time to stop blaming the pine beetle for everything that's wrong with this province's forests and focus on real solutions: strong and decisive government leadership; transparent, meaningful public input; and genuine concern and habitat protection for our increasingly threatened wildlife.

