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## **Science & Technology**

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# **Draft federal caribou strategy allows more development on critical habitat**

By: Bob Weber, The Canadian Press

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Ottawa's proposed recovery plans for threatened caribou herds would allow more development on critical habitat in Alberta's oilsands region — as long as those roads, mines and clear-cuts are combined with other management tools such as shooting wolves.

"(Critical habitat) may be decreased ... should jurisdictions provide a plan that will support stabilized local populations through the use of mortality and habitat management tools," the federal recovery plan says.

"Specific management of other wildlife species (i.e., predators and/or alternate prey) will be required to stop boreal population declines."

Environment Minister Peter Kent acknowledged Friday the plan means killing wolves.

"Predator control has been chosen," he said. "That bothers me a great deal. It certainly disturbs me that 100 wolves have to be killed to protect four caribou calves."

Cliff Wallis of the Alberta Wilderness Association said preying on the predators won't solve the underlying problem of habitat loss.

"The plan gives the appearance of doing something but the details read business as usual for Alberta oilsands, oil and gas, and forestry," he said.

The plan, which now undergoes a 60-day period for public comment, points out that 40 of Canada's 57 woodland caribou herds are no longer self-sustaining.

The situation is worst in northern B.C. and Alberta. Almost all the Alberta herds — most of which are in the same region as the oilsands — are "very unlikely" to survive.

Other studies have reached similar conclusions.

One found an average of 75 per cent of caribou range in the oilsands area has been disturbed by fire, industry, or both. Another said two Alberta herds have declined by three-quarters in the last 10 to 15 years. Some now number fewer than 200 animals.

Last September, scientists on Alberta's endangered species conservation committee linked habitat loss with industrial activity. The federal government reached the same conclusion.

"(The) main threats are habitat loss and degradation caused primarily by industrial activities such as forestry, oil and gas, mining, and hydro-electric," the federal government says.

The federal plan sets out thresholds for critical habitat preservation in different parts of Canada.

Where at least two-thirds of a herd's range remains undisturbed, no activities will be permitted that reduce undisturbed habitat below 65 per cent. No development can take place in areas where there is less than five per cent undisturbed habitat.

But for places where undisturbed areas are between five and 65 per cent of the range — such as northeast Alberta — habitat can be reduced as long as there is a plan to "stabilize" the local herd. The plan suggests a herd is stabilized when it consists of at least 100 animals.

Eventually, the plan suggests that damaged habitat will be restored until all herds enjoy about 65 per cent undisturbed habitat over their entire range. That process would take about 50 years, the plan suggests, although it adds that restoration techniques haven't been tested over the long-term.

"Development is likely to go ahead, but with an eye to restoration and remediation of habitat and ultimately to the sustainability of all the herds," said Kent.

"We have to balance environmental conservation and preservation with the reality of civilization and economic development."

"It's supposed to be a recovery strategy; it's barely a survival strategy," said Melissa Gorrie, a lawyer for Ecojustice, which had asked a Federal Court judge to force Kent to issue an emergency order to protect caribou habitat, which they say is required under the Species At Risk Act.

Justice Peter Crampton declined, saying he would wait for Kent to issue the recovery plan first.

Kent's plan won't change anything, Gorrie said.

"It's going to be status quo. Nothing's going to change and the declines will continue."

She said her group will consider further legal action after the final plan is submitted.

But woodland caribou continue to be a problematic species.

While both provincial and federal governments say they're trying to protect the herds, attempts to preserve habitat by restricting development in northeast Alberta have been stoutly resisted by the energy, forestry, and agriculture industries. All three have opposed recommendations to list Alberta's caribou as endangered.

Some in the energy industry also protested loudly when Alberta proposed creating new protected areas for caribou at the expense of some oilsands developers.