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## **Provincial Recovery Plan for Caribou Authorizes More Logging, and Oil and Gas Development in Alberta's Foothills Caribou Forests**

### **Woodland Caribou Herds Declining Toward Extinction in Alberta**

(Edmonton) Rural and provincial conservation groups today distributed copies of a new provincial government recovery plan for Alberta's endangered woodland caribou. The 'Action Plan for West-Central Alberta Caribou Recovery' authorizes ongoing logging and oil and gas development in the caribou home ranges north of Hinton and Grande Cache. The groups also displayed more than two dozen Alberta government and science reports, consultations and recovery plans for caribou released since the late 1970's, showing industrial impacts on forests and wildlife as the root cause of caribou decline.

The groups highlighted the fact that the government did not act on the previous plans written since the 1970's, while at the same time Alberta's caribou population has declined by almost two-thirds, from a high of an estimated population of 7,000 - 9,000 in the 1960's to an estimated 3,000 today. Last year, a Canada-wide scientific review found that Alberta's herds of woodland caribou were the most in danger of extinction among all provinces. Logging and oil and gas allocations increased rapidly during the 1980's and 1990's and now blanket Alberta forests.

A long-time Hinton resident and wilderness outfitter Rocky Notness said, "I've watched government and industry studying and talking about protecting caribou for over thirty years, yet again, I see nothing in this plan by Minister Morton to protect caribou. We're losing our caribou, and it makes me very disappointed, and angry." The caribou recovery plan for West-Central was written in May 2009 by Minister Ted Morton's department of Sustainable Resource Development, but was not then released to the public.

A 2005 provincial report listed the Little Smoky caribou herd in the region north of Hinton in immediate danger of extinction, but Helene Walsh of the Canadian Parks And Wilderness Society noted that, "the 2005 report did not lead to forest protection for the Little Smoky caribou and now Minister Morton is repeating that same sad story in the current plan. Albertans might wonder how he can advertise this as a 'recovery' plan for caribou, when the summary page states that his department's mandate is 'enabling' access to resources yet only describes caribou habitat protection as a 'high' expectation."

Cliff Wallis, of the Alberta Wilderness Association, said, "We've tried our best for decades to point out solutions. Caribou need large areas of forests protected from industrial development. The Alberta government is simply failing its responsibility to protect wildlife habitat, and there's no clearer evidence than the declining numbers of caribou." Wallis said four polls from government, industry and private since 2006 show Albertans put wildlife protection as their top priority in Alberta's forests. "We're simply asking the provincial government to respect the values Albertans have and act responsibly on their behalf for the caribou."





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The Little Smoky herd population is estimated at about 80 animals. The herd was red-listed in the 2008 Environment Canada Scientific Review due to ongoing unsustainable fragmentation and loss of forests from logging and oil and gas wells, roads, and pipelines. New logging was authorized this year by the provincial government in the most intact remaining forests in its home range. Much of the herd's original range has been logged.

Currently none of the Little Smoky forests are protected from industry. In Alberta's foothills, over 98% of the lands are either already allocated to industry or open to industry. Only 1.2% is protected, in small scattered parks. Recent science-based recommendations call for protecting as much as 50% of Canada's forests to ensure habitat protection for animals such as caribou.

Conservation groups began proposing protection for the herd's forest home range since the late 1970's. First Nations people, trappers, hunters, and local residents have actively supported wilderness park proposals. In the 1990's the area was nominated for a Special Places 2000 site designation as a wilderness park by numerous organizations and individuals. Minister Ty Lund, Environment Minister at the time, rejected protection of the site in favor of logging tenures granted to pulp mills and the oil and gas industry's opposition.

Conservation groups are working together in the Alberta Foothills Network for protection of the Little Smoky caribou and other herds in Alberta's West-Central foothills region, including the Athabasca Bioregional Society based in Hinton, the Keepers of the Athabasca, Alberta Wilderness Association, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, the Canadian Parks And Wilderness Society, (Northern Alberta Chapter), and Sierra Club.

History: <http://www.albertawilderness.ca/issues/areas/little-smoky/history>

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- Hinton resident since 1974 and wilderness ecotourism outfitter, guest ranch operator

Keepers of the Athabasca  
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