



Wild Lands Advocate 11(6): 10, December 2003

POSSIBILITIES FOR BETTER MANAGEMENT OPEN IN CHINCHAGA

By Shirley Bray, *WLA* Editor

The Alberta government has decided to rule out permanent timber allocation within a 350,000-hectare area, identified as the P-8 forest management unit, just north of the Chinchaga Wildland Provincial Park. A government team will be established for the P-8 area in early 2004 to begin the process for developing a management strategy. Public consultation will be part of the process. This decision was announced as part of the Department's commitment to allocate the unallocated timber in northern Alberta.

Cliff Wallis, AWA past-president, thinks reducing forestry is a good first step. "We have continuing concerns, however, over the current lack of an integrated approach to oil and gas development and other land uses, including recreational activities." AWA would also like to see the area expanded onto Halverson Ridge to the east, with its tremendous stands of old growth forest and great habitat for a diversity of plants and animals.

Jonathan Wright, a wildlife biologist who knows the area intimately, agrees and says the overall timber values in the chosen area are poor anyway. However, he thinks it is a major step "to recognize that there are limits to how many interests an area can sustainably serve." Deciding which activities to exclude would have to be based on the concept of which activities give the most value to the most people at the least cost to the environment.

Wright's colleague, Jessica Ernst, says Chinchaga is largely an oil and gas resource extraction area. "Limiting forestry industry in the Chinchaga area provides some mitigation to cumulative effects."

In a recent press release, Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) Minister Mike Cardinal said, "We can now place a greater emphasis on the environmental features of the area while ensuring a balanced approach to the continued oil and gas activity. The government has recognized some of the values and priorities in this area, including watershed management, caribou recovery and grizzly bear management – and we will be able to build on our ongoing efforts here. We are committed to ensuring balanced social, environmental and economic benefits for this area."

Both Wright and Wallis are concerned about the cumulative effects of different land uses on caribou and carnivores such as wolverine, lynx, fisher and otter. Wallis believes that while it is possible to develop oil and gas in a more environmentally benign manner, AWA still has serious concerns related to its wide distribution and impact over large areas as well as the lack of integrated planning of all land uses. "AWA will be working to ensure those issues are addressed in upcoming planning."

Rick Schneider of CPAWS was pleased with the announcement but noted that ideally "the higher quality forest south and east of the existing park would have been protected instead of the forest north of the park." He believes that the oil and gas industry can achieve "no trace" exploration and development, with no new roads.

He noted that the main thing the new site has going for it is size. "Large size is critical for maintaining ecological integrity and supporting local populations of caribou and grizzly. The new area has great diversity; it contains both upper and lower foothills, about half of it is comprised of merchantable forest, about a quarter of it is covered by peatlands, and it contains the Chinchaga river valley. Most of the forest is young, reflecting the fact that about 60 per cent of the site burned in the largest fire in Alberta's historical record. This again underscores the importance of large size because it is unlikely that the entire site will ever be burned in a single fire event."

