



Wild Lands Advocate 12(3): 20, June 2004

Weyerhaeuser Postpones Logging in Caribou Habitat

Mark Lowey, *Enviroline*

Weyerhaeuser Co. says it will postpone logging for five years on 82,000 hectares of environmentally sensitive woodland caribou habitat around Grande Prairie.

The company's plan dovetails with the federal *Species at Risk Act* that comes into effect in June. Woodland caribou are listed as a threatened species under both provincial and federal legislation. Weyerhaeuser says it decided it had to suspend timber harvesting in parts of the Red Rock, Prairie Creek, Daniel and Narraway ranges after its own \$1-million, five-year study showed the areas are heavily used as winter habitat by about 300 caribou.

The company hopes its action serves as an example of environmental stewardship in line with legislation and social trends, said Luigi Morgantini, Weyerhaeuser's wildlife biologist and forest ecologist coordinator. Delaying logging will provide time to gather more information on caribou needs and to implement a caribou-recovery plan in coordination with government and other stakeholders, he said.

Federal Environment Minister David Anderson applauded what he called Weyerhaeuser's responsible leadership. Alberta Sustainable Resources Development Minister Mike Cardinal also praised the plan, which he said is supported by the government.

Brian Bildson, co-chairman of the Greater Kakwa environmental group in Grande Prairie, said he's encouraged by Weyerhaeuser's plan and would like to see the oil and gas industry follow the company's example.

A draft report of the *Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan*, obtained by the *Edmonton Journal*, suggests establishing a moratorium on industrial activity within caribou ranges until a full assessment is made of the effects on herds. The report says that two herds, outside of Weyerhaeuser's forest management areas, are threatened with elimination if industrial activity continues.

Last year, Canadian Forest Products Limited (Canfor) and Alberta Newsprint Company both logged in the range used by the Little Smoky herd. The herd, north of Grande Cache, has dwindled to some 60 to 100 animals and experts say it is on the brink of extinction.

Dwight Weeks, a forest planner with Canfor, said the company kept new logging roads to a minimum, avoided areas heavily used by caribou, and reclaimed and closed roads off as soon as harvesting operations were done.

Greg Branton, a forest planner with Alberta Newsprint, said his firm took similar precautions and also left islands of uncut timber and other habitat for the animals within each cutblock. "The concept of just stopping everything, all industrial activity on that land base, although it may appear appealing, would be extremely difficult," Branton said.

Talisman Energy Ltd., which has natural gas wells in caribou ranges and has contributed staff and funds to protect the habitat, doesn't intend to follow Weyerhaeuser's example, said Talisman spokesman Barry Nelson.

There are vast differences between the impacts of logging large tracts and restricted gas exploration, he said.





David Pryce, vice-president, Western Canada operations at the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, said the industry has contributed at least \$1.5 million of about \$4 million worth of research on the caribou issue. Companies try to use narrow, winter-only roads or helicopters in caribou habitat, and they zigzag roads through the bush to make it harder for predators and poachers to spot the caribou, Pryce said.

But Sid Tilbury, a trapper in Grande Cache, said companies are still building high-grade roads and well leases in caribou habitat and then not locking gates to control public access.

David Schindler, professor of ecology at University of Alberta, said U of A research—corroborated by aboriginal people who live in northeast Alberta—shows that wolves and coyotes use the “extensive network of seismic lines and trails” to penetrate the peatlands that are prime caribou habitat, greatly increasing caribou mortality.

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