



Wild Lands Advocate 13(2): 16 - 17, April 2005

The Caribou Dilemma: Government Struggles with Woodland Caribou File While Industry Flourishes

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In a meeting with environmental groups in February, Assistant Deputy Minister of Fish and Wildlife Ken Ambrock admitted, "The caribou file is the most complex species file right now. We struggle on this file." By "struggle," Ambrock means that although the department is concerned about caribou, the required decisions are complicated by ongoing industrial development. It is a clash of values: the future of Alberta's threatened caribou herds versus the "Alberta Advantage."

At the meeting, AWA had the opportunity to discuss the protection of caribou populations and habitat, and their recovery. AWA and other groups stressed that a strong policy commitment is required by government. Such a statement is what many in industry tell us they have been wanting and waiting for: a policy to help direct the activities of industry within caribou ranges.

"We need across the board agreement on the caribou policy," says Ambrock, referring in particular to the Departments of Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) and Energy. Despite a request from AWA, the Department of Energy has not yet scheduled a meeting with us to discuss caribou issues.

While we wait for agreement among government departments, industry continues to race ahead with new developments within caribou range. Industry may seem even more eager these days as we continue to wait for the release of recommendations from the Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan (Recovery Plan). Environmental groups anticipate the release of the Recovery Plan by Minister of SRD David Coultts within the next month. The possible outcomes from the Recovery Plan are encouraging, particularly when the Minister stated in a letter to AWA, "I do realize that time is of the essence with respect to moving forward on caribou recovery actions."

Companies profiting from the delay in the release of the Recovery Plan include Suncor Energy and Talisman Energy. Talisman plans to build a 70-km pipeline through the ranges of the RedRock/Prairie Creek and A la Peche caribou herds in the spring of 2005. AWA requested that the company defer this project until the release of the Recovery Plan due to the risk placed on these animals. In a nutshell, Talisman made it clear that science falls short and even they are "not intelligent enough" to know the impact industry has on these ranges.

What this seems to mean is that "science has not yet implicated industry in the decline of the caribou within this region – therefore we still have the green light to proceed." In any case, the deficiency of information should trigger the precautionary principle, especially when the survival of a highly sensitive species is at stake. Although science may not yet dictate that industry should not be in the range, neither does it imply that industry should operate there.

The Recovery Plan, which is just an advisory document, is lagging behind the industrial activity on the ground and this may impact decisions the government makes. How strong will the government's commitment to caribou be? How far will they go to recover their populations and habitat? Most importantly, will they declare that caribou are important enough to defer oil and gas and other industrial developments within caribou ranges: that is, can caribou become an integral component of the Alberta Advantage?

While some companies continue to ignore the plight of the caribou, at least one company is making a surprise move on the caribou front. Starting in the 2005-2006 winter season, Canadian Forest Products





(Canfor) announced they will defer harvesting and road construction for two years within the range of the Little Smoky caribou herd range. This deferral will constitute approximately one-sixth of their Forest Management Area (FMA), or 250,000 cubic meters of timber. This voluntary delay in activity is intended to give the Alberta government time to adopt and implement recommendations from the Recovery Plan. This initiative follows in the footsteps of Weyerhaeuser, who have also elected to defer harvest in a portion of their FMA within the Narraway and RedRock/Prairie Creek caribou herd ranges until 2009.

In the end, it seems the fate of the caribou rests largely in the hands of the provincial government. Ambrock suggested that if stakeholders come to government with a common position on caribou, such an alliance would make government's job much easier. A common or shared vision for caribou management may be difficult to achieve, given the pressure and intensity of industrial development in Alberta. However, Ambrock suggests, "a common vision for everyone must be a healthy landscape." He adds, "But we're not doing a good job at getting it done."

To begin formulating this common position, AWA supports the establishment of a provincial multi-stakeholder caribou committee (PCC) to manage Alberta's remaining caribou herds.

To be effective, a common position must include: a) a long-term commitment to the protection of a portion of caribou ranges, b) the implementation of caribou habitat restoration activities, c) deferral of industrial activities while range assessments and restoration is undertaken, d) integrated access management planning, and e) no new activity allocations.

In a letter, Minister Coutts said that his announcement on the Recovery Plan would include recommendations regarding the establishment of a single provincial caribou committee. He also asked for continued patience on the matter.

We must continue to move forward if we are to conserve Alberta's remaining caribou herds, and we need to consider our choices carefully. "Industry committed to reducing their footprint a decade ago, but it's not happening," says Cliff Wallis, past-president of AWA. "In the end we need wilderness protected from industry. We need to make a choice."

