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Land Swapping May Help Save Valuable Boreal Forests in Northeastern Alberta

Alberta still has an excellent opportunity to protect several significant unfragmented wild forests in northeastern Alberta, such as those in the Primrose-Lakeland area, which are still relatively unaffected by petroleum and forestry operations. However, saving the best forests left may hinge on the judicious swapping of land in the region already under various uses, including Alberta-Pacific's Forest Management Area, as well as a commitment to legislated protection for the intact forests gained through this process.

"If land swaps in the Primrose-Lakeland region will further the Canadian Boreal Initiative's goal of conserving at least 50 percent of Canada's boreal forest in a network of large interconnected protected areas then we should explore this option," says Ian Urquhart, a University of Alberta political scientist who is leading AWA's work in the Primrose-Lakeland area. "But, AWA consideration of such a significant land use change would hinge on promoting boreal forest conservation goals elsewhere in the region," he adds.

The value of considering the land swap option is suggested by the just-released Global Forest Watch Canada study of Canada's remaining wild forests. That study identifies several wild forest fragments in the Primrose-Lakeland region. One wild fragment links Lakeland Provincial Park with land in the southwest quadrant of the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range. Another area joins the northeast quadrant of the Range with the forests found in the Winefred Lake region to the north. A third area, the southeast quadrant of the Range, offers a conservation connection with Saskatchewan's Primrose Lake Ecological and Wildlife Refuges.

"If the landscapes in the northwest quadrant and the centre of the Range have been seriously fragmented by oil and gas then perhaps these areas should be added to Alberta-Pacific's Forest Management Agreement area," says Urquhart. "Al-Pac would have to relinquish its rights to cut timber in the Winefred Lake area and the province would have to move to establish long-term protection for the intact forests in that area as well as in the three other quadrants of the Weapons Range."

Last year AWA called on both the provincial government and the Canadian military to study the potential of the Range to contribute to the ambitious protected areas targets endorsed by Alberta-Pacific, Suncor, and other supporters of the CBI. Given the alarming rate at which our valuable boreal forests are being fragmented by industry these valuable conservation opportunities should not go unheeded.

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