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Government Hog-ties Committee for Caribou Recovery

By David Samson, AWA Conservation Specialist

The Alberta Caribou Committee (ACC) – charged with enacting a recovery plan for woodland caribou, a threatened species in Alberta – appears to be woefully under-resourced by the provincial government to accomplish that task.

“In a nutshell, I think we’re making progress, but not at the pace that many of us would like,” says Dr. Luigi Morgantini, a member of the ACC, a wildlife biologist with Weyerhaeuser, and an adjunct professor with University of Alberta. Morgantini has spent more than 25 years researching and mitigating the impact of human activity on wildlife and biodiversity.

“It is an issue of resources; that is, people. Everybody [on the committee] has other jobs.” Morgantini acknowledges it is a difficult and challenging process to start with, but not having the proper resources exacerbates the problem.

Cliff Wallis, an AWA director and ACC member, echoes those sentiments. “We are seeing glacial movement on the ACC. It’s been one year since the committee was established and the first concrete recommendations from a sub-committee are not expected until October. In the meantime, the ACC is on hold, it is business as usual in places like the Little Smoky, and wildlife continues to suffer.”

The ACC is a committee made up of well-intentioned and highly qualified people, but is apparently not provided with sufficient resources or tools to complete the job for which it has been commissioned. Only one of an intended seven caribou range (or landscape) teams has been established. Wallis attributes the lack of progress to the government “dancing around the budget, not providing adequate human resources to accomplish the goals, and not providing sufficient funds for the committee and its sub-committees to make progress in woodland caribou recovery.” He deems this to be a “critical failure.”

Alberta classified woodland caribou as “threatened” under the 1987 Wildlife Act and as “endangered” under the 2000 Wildlife Act. Federally, COSEWIC and the Species At Risk Act listed the species as “threatened” in 2000 and 2002 respectively. In 2005, the ACC was established by the provincial government from an amalgamation of two previous committees and a woodland caribou recovery team to ensure Alberta has a caribou recovery plan in place by 2007.

The government has recognized since the 1970s that an effective provincial management plan is necessary to stem the long-term decline of woodland caribou in Alberta. At least three separate government-commissioned strategies have come and gone (1986, 1993, and 1996) with few recommendations being adopted. The fear is that this committee could become the fourth to suffer such a fate.

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development’s own website states clearly what it believes is currently happening to the caribou and why: “Among North American ungulates, the woodland caribou appears to be least able to adapt to the magnitude of environmental changes associated with agricultural, urban, and industrial development over the past 100 years. ... These caribou are likely to become extirpated in Alberta if the factors causing their reduction in numbers are not reversed. ... There is little data on past and current population size of caribou in Alberta.”

The inaction of the provincial government in ensuring adequate resources are in place to properly address and implement a woodland caribou recovery plan reflects the low priority it has given to





woodland caribou recovery, even though it knows what is happening and why. The government appears to be acting as if extirpation is a *fait accompli* by feigning interest in caribou recovery.

In our roaring economy, it is clearly a matter of political will, not money. Public sentiment appears to be siding with the caribou. A recent Alberta Forest Products Association survey found that over 80 percent of respondents believed that access and use of forests should be based primarily on preserving and protecting the environment and sustaining wildlife habitat at the expense of sustained economic benefits and jobs.

In the meantime, with the ACC on a glacial-paced course, and government intransigent in considering a deferral or moratorium on industrial activity, industry continues with a “smash and grab” for oil and gas in the Little Smoky woodland caribou herd’s habitat. Industry is now expanding that activity into the relatively pristine caribou and grizzly bear habitat in the Kakwa region – virtually assuring the imminent extirpation of the Little Smoky herd. Time is becoming increasingly short for woodland caribou, the ACC, and according to Cliff Wallis, ENGO support for the committee.

