

Release Date: November 10, 2006

Alberta Government's War – Threatened Caribou Are First Casualties

The Alberta government has approved a policy that compels forestry companies to fight mountain pine beetle by clearcutting old pine forest in Alberta's Foothills. Alberta is forcing companies such as Weyerhaeuser in Grande Prairie to log mature pine forest that is at risk of mountain pine beetle attack. AWA and others believe the first casualty of Alberta's war on the forest will be threatened caribou populations.

"Alberta has declared war on foothills forest, not war on the pine beetle," said Cliff Wallis, past president of the Alberta Wilderness Association. "Other companies are requesting an increase in their Annual Allowable Cut." While much of west-central Alberta will be impacted by the policy shift, the area of most immediate concern is the north Narraway region.

A decision yesterday may have determined the fate of an area, far from existing clearcuts and deep in high quality caribou habitat, by approving logging in critical caribou habitat. "If we don't stop this insane approach to forest management now, Alberta will have sealed the fate of these caribou - they will simply vanish from this area over the next 10 years," said Wallis.

The Alberta Caribou Committee and the West Central Caribou Landscape Planning Team have been designing strategies to maintain or increase caribou populations in the same areas that forestry companies are being forced to log. Multi-stakeholder committees have been working on caribou recovery for over 15 years and have recently developed new short term strategies to help caribou recovery. "Those efforts will all be wasted if Alberta's new policy is allowed to stand," said Wallis.

"The number one concern of our planning team was the possibility of logging for pine beetle in caribou range," said Helene Walsh, Boreal Campaign Director for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society in Edmonton. "We were told by a government representative that areas outside of caribou range would be logged before areas in caribou range but Weyerhaeuser would be an exception. It doesn't make any sense and Weyerhaeuser will be unfairly criticized for this."

Pine beetle is a native species. It has affected much of British Columbia's pine forest. Cold winters used to kill young beetles; however, this has not been the case for several years and they are spreading into Alberta. The Alberta government's recently announced policy is a desperate attempt to stop the spread in Alberta. Unfortunately, British Columbia learned in its years of effort to stop the beetle's spread—nothing worked.

Years of mismanagement, including fire control and the effects of global climate change, have produced the current crisis. By harvesting the trees before the pine beetle can attack them, Alberta is spending millions of dollars implementing a policy that will severely reduce older pine forest in the Foothills. This plan contradicts Alberta's commitment to caribou recovery. Much of that mature pine forest is the last remaining habitat for Foothills caribou. British Columbia found that caribou do well after pine beetle attacks. In contrast, caribou disappear after clearcutting the mature forests that caribou need to survive.

A recent Alberta Forest Products Association survey indicated that 84% of Albertans believe that access and use of forests should be based firstly on preserving and protecting the environment and sustaining wildlife habitat at the expense of sustained economic benefits and jobs. "It is time the Alberta government listened to the wishes of Albertans for a continued heritage of wilderness and wildlife. The Alberta war on the forest is bad for caribou, bad for foothills forest and bad for the economies of the foothills communities that depend on this badly mismanaged resource. It's time for an end to a war on the woods." said Wallis.

For further information contact:

Cliff Wallis, AWA Past President 403.271-1408
Helene Walsh, CPAWS Edmonton 780.922-0908
David Samson, AWA Conservation Specialist 403 283-2025

Caribou Herds of Alberta map is available at: <http://issues.albertawilderness.ca/WL/cariboufeatures.htm>

