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Caribou Jeopardized by Forest Products Association Decision to Clearcut for Pine Beetle

Alberta's threatened woodland caribou suffered one more nail in the coffin with the recent about-turn by the Alberta Forest Products Association (AFPA) in its decision to ignore caribou habitat in the ongoing "war on pine beetle." Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is fed-up with one more flip-flop in the AFPA's inconsistent approach to protection of the endangered woodland caribou, and is calling for their removal from the Alberta government's Caribou Committee (ACC.).

"There is no proof that these pine beetle control strategies have any chance of success but we do know they will destroy caribou habitat," says Cliff Wallis, past-president of AWA, and a member of the ACC. "We are asking for the removal of the AFPA from the ACC as they will not operate in good faith. This has been demonstrated twice by reversals of decisions they signed on to - once with the Caribou Recovery Plan and most recently with the West Central interim strategies." These interim recommendations, supported by all members of the Landscape Team of the ACC, including the AFPA, called for no clearcut logging for pine beetle control in caribou range.

AWA recently received correspondence, dated January 15, 2007, from Dave Kmet, Director of Forestry for the AFPA and a member of the Alberta Caribou Committee, indicating that the AFPA no longer supports the interim recommendations of the West Central Landscape Team regarding Mountain Pine Beetle control. AFPA's letter states that "it would be inappropriate to expect industry and government to limit harvest operations to the existing checkerboard pattern (first pass areas) and Level 1 control only. Where other control strategies, such as Level 2, have a reasonable chance for controlling the outbreak in caribou habitat, these strategies need to be available as an option."

Level 1 control involves intense monitoring and selective cutting and burning of affected trees. But the Alberta Government had been directing forestry companies to commence Level 2 control, which includes clearcut logging and liquidation of pine forest in critical habitat of woodland caribou. AWA remains opposed to clear-cut logging and industrial activity in critical woodland caribou habitat, as data from British Columbia indicate that caribou do not utilize areas that have been logged for pine beetle control.

"The Alberta Government has accepted the recommendation of no greater than a Level 1 cut but is operating outside of this recommendation," Wallis adds. "Someone has to stop the madness and bring order to this chaos. SRD is forcing forestry companies like Weyerhaeuser to log in critical caribou habitat, continuing with caribou recovery strategies that have failed to work for the past 14 years," adds Wallis.

Helene Walsh, Boreal Campaign Director with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society concurs, saying, "The pine beetle invasion of Alberta is massive and this was known summer 2006. There are plenty of places for industry to log to try to prevent pine beetle spread, without going near any caribou range, and the AFPA members know that. I don't think all industry operating in the area agrees with the AFPA position on this, and they need to speak up now if they do not. It is also time for government to act on the Alberta Caribou Committee recommendations and stop clearcut logging in caribou range."

The area most directly affected in the near term is the north Narraway River region of West Central Alberta, vital habitat for the endangered woodland caribou. "The pine liquidation as stated in the SRD directive ultimately will result in an age-class distribution that will not be compatible with maintenance of current caribou herds," says Dr. Luigi Morgantini, a Weyerhaeuser wildlife biologist and ACC member.

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Page 1 of 1

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