



The Honourable Jim Prentice  
Minister of Environment  
House of Commons  
Parliament Buildings  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

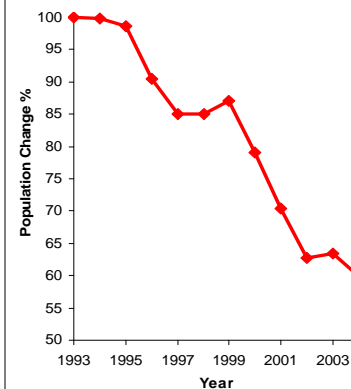
February 2010

Dear Minister Prentice:

**RE: Petition in support of an Emergency Order pursuant to section 80 of the *Species at Risk Act*, 2002, c.29 for protecting Woodland Caribou in Alberta**

We were encouraged by the statements you made recently regarding the need for industry and the Alberta government to work with Ottawa to improve Canada's environmental reputation. The situation for caribou in the oil sands area, and the rest of Alberta, is of great concern and we need to work quickly to address the problem because with every delay the task of recovering caribou and their habitat becomes more difficult. As we describe below it seems the only hope the Alberta caribou have is intervention by the Federal Government. As you were quoted recently in the media: "Absent this kind of Canadian leadership, we will be cast as a global poster child for environmentally unsound resource development. Canadians expect and deserve more than that." This is an excellent time to demonstrate Canadian leadership.

Decline of caribou in the oil sands area Alberta

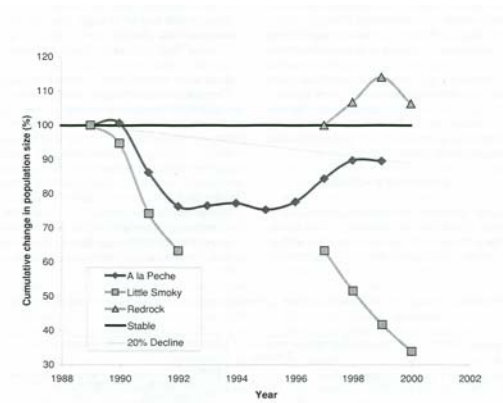


From data presented in Boreal Caribou Research Program, 2003

In December 2005 Ecojustice, on our behalf, requested that the Hon. Stephane Dion recommend to cabinet that an emergency order issue pursuant to section 80 of the *Species at Risk Act* seeking protection of critical habitat in Alberta until such time as recovery planning is completed on the basis that Woodland Caribou in Alberta face imminent threat to their survival or recovery. That request was not acted upon. **Since then the situation for caribou in Alberta has continued to deteriorate, and so we repeat our request with additional information and greater urgency considering:**

- continued petroleum activity in the remaining intact portions of the range;
- the recently approved new logging plan;

- continuation of old logging plans in the ranges;
- the new genetic studies which indicate the uniqueness of the Foothills herds;
- and the recently completed government action plan which does not protect caribou habitat.



Planning for the north east part of Alberta (the oil sands area) is now taking place through the Lower Athabasca Regional Planning process. The caribou herds in that area are also in steep population decline (see graph above). We fear that with the precedent set for no habitat protection in the final plan for the west central herds, the herds in the Lower Athabasca will also receive no habitat protection. We urge you to use the emergency order to ensure caribou range in Alberta is protected immediately, and caribou will continue to exist in our province.

**Values of the area:** The Alberta Foothills Boreal Forest is a very fragmented area with forestry cut blocks, roads, seismic lines, power and pipelines, and well sites. It has only 1.2% of its area protected from industrial use. The areas inhabited by the caribou herds are the most intact forest left in this ecoregion. Protection of the remaining caribou ranges would help to meet Canadian and Alberta commitments to the National Forest Strategy and the Canadian Biodiversity Strategy and improve our international image. It would preserve valuable wilderness areas for native species including bull trout, grizzly bear and wolverine. It is also very accessible for tourism and recreation that would enable diversification of local economies. It is the headwaters for rivers that feed the Peace and Athabasca Rivers and is a valuable carbon storage area.

### Our request:

- Require that logging stay out of the entire range, and any adjacent intact potential habitat so the range can be enlarged.
- Protect a core area from all industrial use, with the remainder of the range being available to the petroleum industry at a density and spatial and temporal distribution whereby caribou can start to recover.

The basis for this new request is summarized as follows:

1. The Little Smoky herd is part of the Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*), Boreal population. This herd has been well studied for decades and serves as an example of how the Alberta government is failing to maintain its caribou populations. This herd occupies part of the 'West Central Range', which also includes a number of Southern Mountain population herds (although the Little Smoky herd is non migratory and therefore considered boreal). The Boreal population is legally listed as threatened under SARA. It extends across Canada from the Northwest Territories and BC to Newfoundland.
2. COSEWIC last assessed the Boreal population in May, 2002, confirming its status as threatened; however, a study in 2004 projected significant population declines for particular

herds in Alberta over the next 20 years, and a recent simulation suggested that caribou will be extirpated from north eastern Alberta within 37 years.

3. The *Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan* indicates that herds in Alberta, including the Little Smoky herd, are currently at “immediate risk of extirpation” and that such herds require “immediate and significant actions in order to avoid herd loss.” This information is consistent with that which has been in the public domain for approximately two decades and which indicates that the decline of caribou in Alberta can be directly related to resource extraction activities that degrade their habitat. The Alberta government has ignored the Recovery Team’s recommendation for immediate and significant action and has refused to curtail resource extraction activities which destroy habitat *on even an interim basis while recovery planning is ongoing for herds at immediate risk of extirpation.*
4. Genetic analyses confirm that the Little Smoky population is different from other caribou populations in west-central Alberta, and is likely the last remnant of distinct boreal caribou along the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rockies. The Alberta government took part in that study. Addendum A.
5. Three new reports have indicated the urgent need for maintenance or improvement of caribou ranges in Alberta, including especially the Little Smoky range based on the small size of the herd and the high level of existing disturbance. See Addendum B.
6. The Alberta government has recently approved logging by Foothills Forest Products in the intact portion of the range of the Little Smoky and A La Peche herds. This logging could have started June 2009. See Addendum C. [There are solutions to this logging in the caribou range: To provide the company with alternate wood, change from the current company based forest management area fibre supply to a merged regional fibre supply. Industry calls this a ‘wood basket’. This would then make it possible to use some of the flexibility in fibre supply in the region caused by the closing of one company’s pulp machines, and the ability of the newsprint company logging in caribou range to use recycled paper from Alberta rather than having no recycled content as at present.]
7. New petroleum development continues to fragment the intact portions of the range as indicated in Addendum D. [Caribou can tolerate some level of petroleum development, logging is a much larger concern, however, the threshold for petroleum is unknown so new disturbance for petroleum needs to stop until a fragmentation threshold can be established and implemented.]
8. **The final plan for the West Central Region of Alberta provides no protection of caribou range from industrial use.**

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Cliff Wallis, Vice-President  
Alberta Wilderness Association

*on behalf of*

Phillip Penner, Executive Director  
Nature Alberta

Connie Simmons  
Athabasca Bioregional Society

## **Addendum A.**

### **Mountain Caribou's Ancient Ancestry Revealed**

ScienceDaily (Jan. 28, 2009) — The declining mountain caribou populations of Canada's southern Rockies are a more distinct breed than scientists previously believed, according to a new study by University of Calgary researchers that is shedding light on the ancient ancestry of the mountain-dwelling herbivores.

In a study recently published in the journal *Molecular Ecology*, Faculty of Environmental Design PhD candidate Byron Weckworth and his research group describe how Alberta and British Columbia's mountain caribou populations are remnants of blending between the two major subspecies of caribou that likely occurred during the end of the last ice age about 10,000 years ago.

"These are special animals because they are not woodland caribou or tundra caribou, but a very interesting combination of the two," Weckworth said. "Mountain caribou are an important part of the genetic diversity of the entire species and maintaining that diversity will be critical as caribou face the impacts of continued human development and climate change into the future."

An analysis of mountain caribou DNA and 10 years of tracking the migratory patterns of populations across the southern Rockies in the Yellowstone-to-Yukon corridor, including western Alberta and eastern BC, showed that mountain caribou are hybrids of migratory tundra caribou and sedentary woodland caribou. The researchers believe the blending likely occurred during glacial retreat at the end of the last ice age when both subspecies of caribou could have expanded into the newly ice-free corridor along the eastern slopes of the Rockies.

"Their DNA is basically part woodland and part tundra, which is fascinating because this mixture is apparent given the genetic expression of migratory behavior." Weckworth said. "Among these mountain caribou we see a wide range of behavior from some individuals that don't migrate at all to some that move up to 100 kilometres between the foothills and the mountains every year. Populations contain both migratory and non-migratory individuals, and it is exactly this type of variation that provides them with the flexibility to adapt to a landscape that is changing due to climatic conditions and human activities."

Their findings could lead to a change in how the endangered populations are managed due to their unique genetics and behavior. For example, the Little Smoky population in Alberta has been declining for over a decade because of human-caused habitat changes that are believed to be altering predator-prey relationships. Genetic analyses confirm that the Little Smoky population is different from other caribou populations in west-central Alberta, and is likely the last remnant of distinct boreal caribou along the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rockies.

The study, which was supported by Weyerhaeuser, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, Shell Canada, Parks Canada, and Alberta Department of Sustainable Resource Development, concludes that new conservation plans may be required to reflect the mountain caribou's unique nature.

"It is impossible to predict all the impacts of something like climate change, but we know that migration has been an important adaptive response in the past, and so it is best to preserve this unique genetic and behavioral variability to better enable caribou to adapt to an uncertain future," Weckworth said.

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#### **Journal reference:**

1. McDevitt et al. **Survival in the Rockies of an endangered hybrid swarm from diverged caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) lineages.** *Molecular Ecology*, 2009; 18 (4): 665 DOI: [10.1111/j.1365-294X.2008.04050.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-294X.2008.04050.x) -- Adapted from materials provided by [University of Calgary](http://www.universityofcalgary.ca).

## **Addendum B**

### **Recent recommendations for maintaining and growing intact habitat for woodland caribou—Little Smoky herd.**

**Recommendations for a West Central Alberta Caribou Landscape Plan.** Report to the Deputy Minister, Sustainable Resource Development. Prepared by the Alberta Caribou Committee Governance Board. July 10, 2008.

#### **Caribou habitat intactness:**

- Conserve habitat intactness where it already exists (e.g. through careful management and conservation of larger areas of older forest > 80 years old).
- Facilitate development of more contiguous primary intact areas to provide for continuous areas of older forest through time
- Apply legislative and non-legislative solutions to achieve habitat intactness goals.
- Develop and implement spatial forest harvest sequencing plans and harvesting levels within and potentially adjacent to caribou ranges, to achieve habitat intactness goals and to support caribou population recovery.
- Defer forest harvesting in primary intact areas as part of an overall plan to conserve caribou habitat intactness, as linked to caribou management targets as part of the implementation plan.
- Manage oil and gas development in a manner that will permit an increase in the extent and number of primary intact habitat areas.

Initiate application of the habitat intactness concept immediately, while refinements are being developed.

**Alberta Caribou Committee RMS. 2009. Defining habitat intactness for woodland caribou. Prepared for the Alberta Caribou Committee.**

In an ideal situation, this would mean that no or only low amounts of anthropogenic disturbance would be present in caribou range. In the absence of this ideal situation, the RMS recommends (1) maintaining existing areas of relatively high intactness within a given range and (2) growing these areas via habitat restoration, conservation, and management.

**Environment Canada. 2009. Scientific Review for the Identification of Critical Habitat for Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) Boreal Population, in Canada. [https://www.registrelep-sararegistry.gc.ca/document/default\\_e.cfm?documentID=1761](https://www.registrelep-sararegistry.gc.ca/document/default_e.cfm?documentID=1761)**

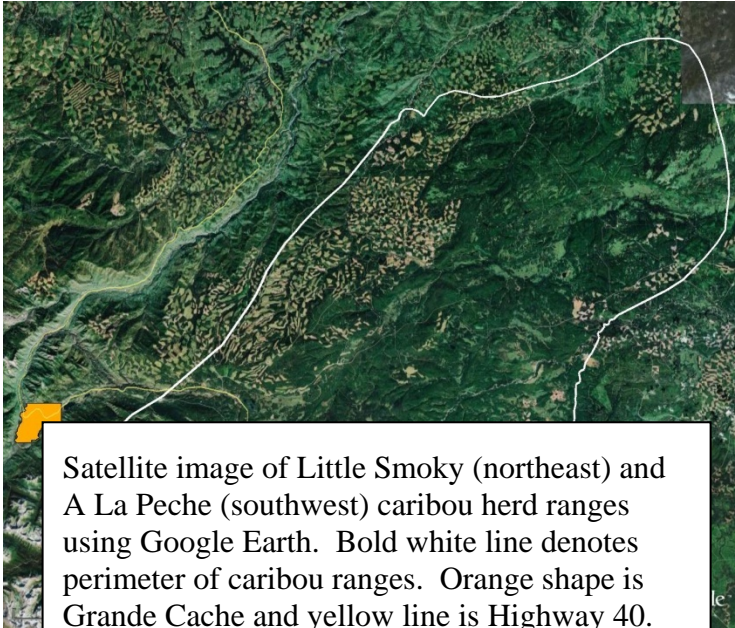
Critical Habitat for boreal caribou was therefore defined as the resources and environmental conditions required for persistence of local populations of boreal caribou throughout their current distribution in Canada.

All Alberta herds are described as being non self sustaining which indicates the high degree of habitat change needed to enable a population to be self-sustaining (e.g. to persist without the need for ongoing management intervention).

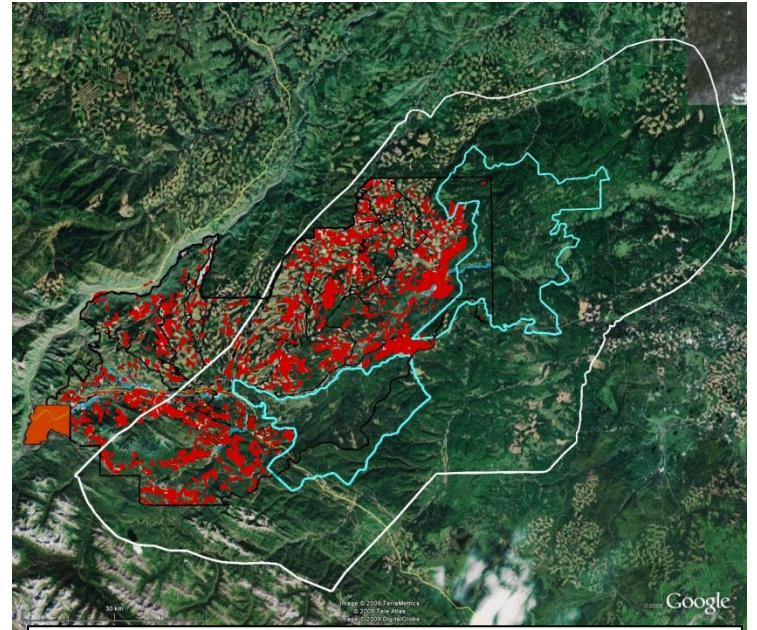
Little Smoky--High weight of evidence that current range is not self sustaining given small, rapidly declining population and very high total disturbance. Anthropogenic disturbance at 82% strongly suggests need for improved conditions.

## Addendum C

Logging approved for 2009-2029 in the A La Peche and Little Smoky caribou ranges.



Satellite image of Little Smoky (northeast) and A La Peche (southwest) caribou herd ranges using Google Earth. Bold white line denotes perimeter of caribou ranges. Orange shape is Grande Cache and yellow line is Highway 40.



Bold blue line denotes perimeter of primary intact caribou habitat created by industry and not accepted by the Alberta Caribou Committee. Red denotes locations where Foothills Forest Products has been granted permission by the Government of Alberta to log during the next 20 years, starting June 2009.

## Addendum D

### Petroleum activity in the caribou ranges 2006-2008.

Little Smoky range with coloured areas indicating intact (roadless) areas of various sizes. Black dots indicate new well sites in the period 2006-2008. New petroleum footprint continues in the range.

