

practices would greatly degrade habitat for many species, and would violate standards of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification currently in place for the Forest Management Agreement area leased by Alberta Pacific Forest Industries Inc. (Al-Pac) over much of the Lower Athabasca. We are even concerned about these proposals applying to private lands because of their harmful impacts to biodiversity. The future of Canadian forestry is sustainable, ecosystem-based management at FSC certification standards, not plantations, particularly on the vast tracts of public lands in the northern boreal forest.

For surface water and groundwater management, the general concepts put forth in the Vision document are sound and overdue, namely, identifying key indicators for quantity and quality, establishing triggers and thresholds, and implementing strong monitoring. The threshold for defining fresh groundwater should be broadened in line with other jurisdictions to better manage a broader spectrum of this resource, and *in situ* operating requirements should be tightened to reduce risk of further fresh and near-freshwater aquifer contamination. Given the past precedents on the Bow, Oldman and Athabasca Rivers, we question whether quantity thresholds will be set at sufficiently precautionary levels given aquatic ecosystem and groundwater knowledge gaps. We also question whether there is political will to fund sound monitoring and actually reduce contaminants from emissions and tailings waste. However, the actual details of these water and air management frameworks are not yet public.

The central problem in the Lower Athabasca region is that the government has over-leased our lands to forestry and energy interests. For forestry, the Vision document proposals seem to confirm what environmentalists loudly warned to no avail: that the current forestry industry's infrastructure is not compatible with ecosystem-based forestry in our fragile boreal forest. We should choose to curtail industrial forestry rather than the boreal ecosystem. Moreover, the laissez-faire approach to granting of energy tenures is fundamentally incompatible with sustainable development principles.

AWA over the decades has called for the protection of the most ecologically significant wilderness areas, including

the large tracts of intact caribou habitat needed to sustain those herds, before government leased to energy and forestry extraction industries. We now support compensation for leaseholders, though this is a regrettably reactive position because of lack of foresight by our government. AWA will continue to insist that Alberta's priorities must be to honour our biodiversity commitments, support sustainable ecosystem-based forestry, and greatly reduce oil sands impacts in the Lower Athabasca region.

- Carolyn Campbell

### Environmental Groups and First Nations File for Caribou Protection

On September 8, 2010, Ecojustice, on behalf of AWA and the Pembina Institute, filed an application for a federal judicial review, asking the court to order Environment Minister Jim Prentice to issue emergency protections for seven caribou herds in northeastern Alberta. The application alleges that Prentice failed to meet legally-binding protection requirements for woodland caribou, a threatened species under Canada's *Species at Risk Act*.

This application supports a similar application filed by Woodward & Company on behalf of the Beaver Lake Cree Nation, Enoch Cree Nation and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation.

The federal government has committed to proposing a national caribou recovery strategy by summer 2011. In the meantime, urgent action is necessary.

Of the seven herds named in the review application, the 2005 Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan identified one herd as at immediate risk of extirpation (Slave Lake Herd), three as declining and just one as stable.

Despite the fact that industrial expansion in caribou habitat is known to pose a constant threat to their survival and recovery, the Alberta government has also refused to implement a recommendation in its own caribou recovery plan, prepared in 2005. The plan calls for a moratorium on further mineral and timber allocations in certain caribou ranges. This call was reiterated by the Alberta Landscape Team's 2009 report for the Alberta Caribou Committee. Dr. Stan Boutin, in an expert report prepared for the Beaver Lake Cree, fully supports the Team's recommendations. Boutin wrote: "The suite of management actions must include: aggressive restoration of seismic lines, well pads and pipelines; no further increase in industrial activity (no further habitat change caused by human land use; full protection of caribou range); and reduction of caribou mortality risk."

The federal *Species at Risk Act* is increasingly being seen as a tool to push both the federal and provincial governments to begin to live up to their obligations to endangered species in the province.

In July 2009, a federal court judge in Vancouver ruled that Environment Canada broke the law by refusing to identify critical habitat in a recovery plan for the endangered greater sage-grouse



*Alberta's assault on caribou habitat continues.*

PHOTO: P. SUTHERLAND

(See “Sage-grouse Court Victory a Major Step for Endangered Species Recovery”, *WLA* December 2009). The lawsuit was filed by Ecojustice in early 2008 on behalf of AWA, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, Grasslands Naturalists, Nature Saskatchewan and the Western

Canada Wilderness Committee.

But of course AWA would much rather see both levels of government taking positive action to protect habitat for endangered species, rather than being dragged kicking and screaming through every step of the legal process.

Many species, including sage-grouse and woodland caribou, do not have the luxury of time on their side.

- *Nigel Douglas*