



MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release:

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Woodland caribou battle goes to Federal Court

Aggressive oilsands development places iconic species' habitat — and future — in peril

EDMONTON — Environmental groups are in Federal Court today to fight for immediate protection of caribou habitat facing unchecked oilsands development in northeastern Alberta.

Ecojustice, on behalf of the Pembina Institute and Alberta Wilderness Association, is seeking a court order to force Environment Minister Peter Kent to recommend emergency protection of critical habitat for threatened caribou herds in northeastern Alberta.

“Minister Kent’s failure to protect woodland caribou is illegal and places the future of Alberta’s caribou at risk,” said Melissa Gorrie, Ecojustice staff lawyer.

“Going to court is the only course of action left. The caribou are in rapid decline while the province turns a blind eye and the federal government drags its heels on its recovery strategy,” she said.

“Without immediate protection, entire herds of this iconic species will disappear.”

The federal recovery strategy, expected to be released this summer, is more than four years overdue. Once released, it will still take years to be implemented, leaving the caribou herds’ future in limbo.

Some herds have declined by more than 70 per cent during the past 15 years.

Abundant scientific evidence indicates that oilsands operations contribute to caribou population declines, yet as of July 2010, there were 34 current or approved oilsands projects and 12 additional proposed projects within the herds’ ranges

A 2010 Alberta government study found that if the current industrial development trend continued, local caribou are likely to become extinct in less than 40 years.

“The federal government has all the information it needs to protect the habitat of woodland caribou,” said Simon Dyer, Policy Director for the Pembina Institute. “Declining woodland caribou herds in Alberta are a symbol of the failure to responsibly manage oilsands development.”

The Government of Alberta’s reluctance to introduce any meaningful caribou habitat protection through its recent Lower Athabasca Regional Plan makes immediate federal action even more critical.

An internal memo to the federal Minister of Environment, a document in the Federal Court case, states that:

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“Alberta has not, to date, effectively managed the cumulative effects within caribou range and has not applied appropriate mitigation (eg. habitat restoration, minimizing footprint) in a coordinated landscape-level approach to conserve caribou.”

“Alberta’s chronic failure to protect its caribou means the federal government must step in with emergency protections before it’s too late,” said Cliff Wallis, Alberta Wilderness Association vice-president.

“If they continue to ignore Alberta's reckless behaviour, the feds will be complicit in the disappearance of these majestic animals from Alberta's forests.”

For more information, please contact:

Devon Page, executive director | Ecojustice
778.828.5512
dpage@ecojustice.ca

Simon Dyer, Policy Director | Pembina Institute
403.322.3937 (mobile)
simond@pembina.org

Cliff Wallis, vice-president | Alberta Wilderness Association
403.607.1970 (mobile)
deercroft@shaw.ca

Nigel Douglas, conservation specialist | Alberta Wilderness Association
403.283.2025



What

Ecojustice, on behalf of the Pembina Institute and Alberta Wilderness Association, is asking the Federal Court to compel Environment Minister Peter Kent to recommend an emergency order protecting threatened woodland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) in northeastern Alberta.

Status

- In dramatic decline, several herds at immediate risk of extirpation (local extinction)
- Listed as “threatened” under *Alberta’s Wildlife Act*
- Listed as “threatened” under the federal *Species at Risk Act*
- In recognition of the dramatic declines that are occurring, the Alberta government’s Endangered Species Scientific Sub-committee recently recommended that Alberta caribou be uplisted from “threatened” to “endangered”

Features

- Extremely sensitive animals intolerant to habitat disturbances
- Require large, continuous tracts of old-growth conifer forests and peatlands to survive
- At risk from industrial development that destroys habitat caribou need to survive
- More vulnerable than most large mammals to habitat changes due in part to low reproductive rate.

Main threats to caribou survival

- Habitat disturbance and loss due to oilsands and forestry development
- Wolf predation as result of human-induced change to landscape



Suncor's Millenium Oilsands Project and Alberta's northeastern boreal forest.
Credit - David Dodge (The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society)

“ The level of habitat disturbance is above 45 per cent for 12 of the 13 local populations [in Alberta]. This level of disturbance is beyond the biologically acceptable threshold for self-sustaining local populations as evidenced by the continued decline of most boreal caribou local population in the province.

– Memorandum to federal Minister of Environment

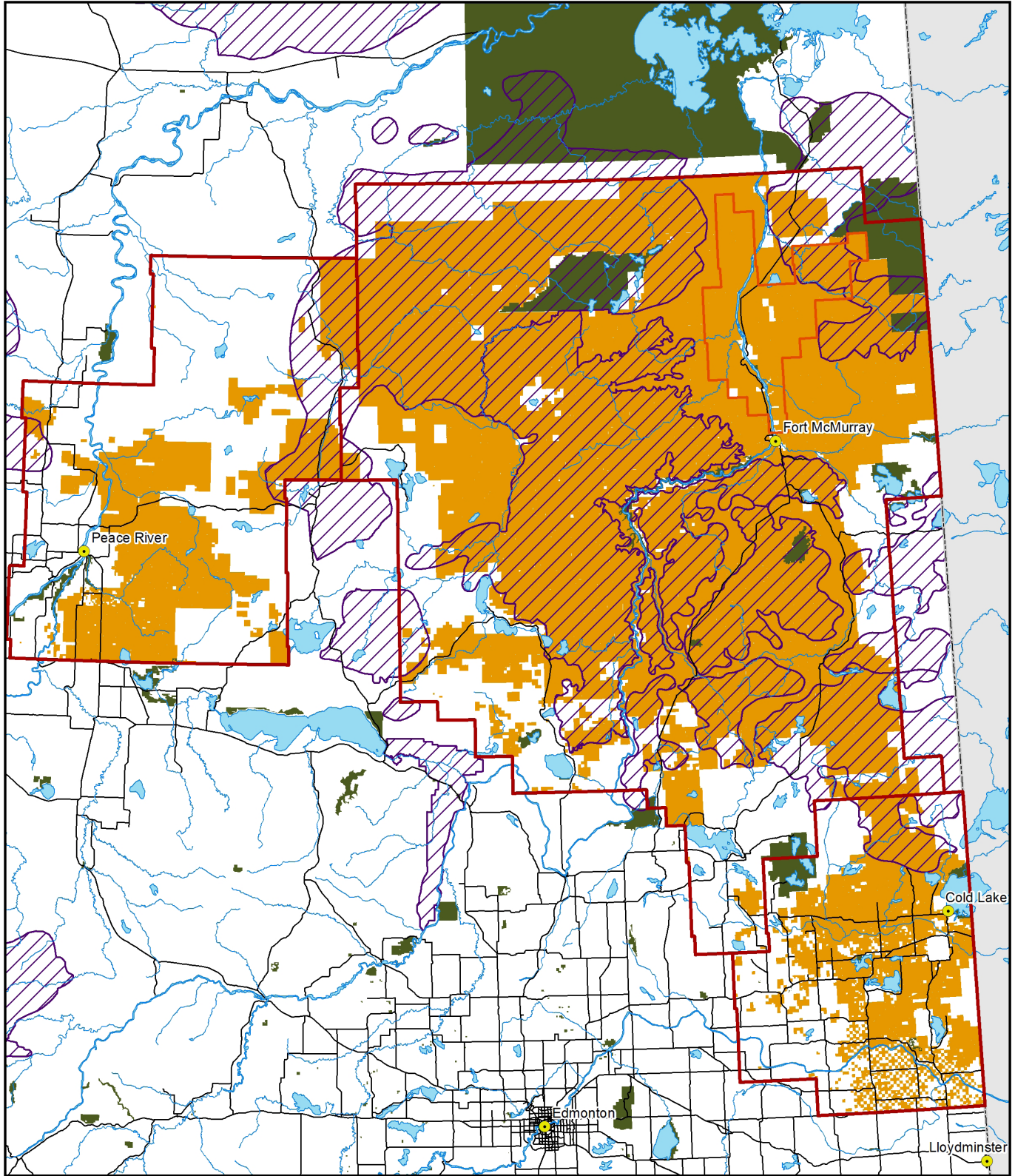







More caribou facts

- The ranges of the northeastern herds are not adequate to support their survival
- Five out of the seven herds found in northeastern Alberta are estimated to have less than a 10 per cent chance of surviving longer than 100 years, based on their current trajectories (not factoring in additional disturbances from future industry development)
- As of July 2010, there were 34 current or approved oilsands projects, and 12 proposed projects within the herds' ranges (Memorandum to federal Minister of Environment)
 - More than 46,000 km² has been leased for oilsands development (see map)
- If current industrial development trend continues, the herds are likely to be extirpated in less than 40 years (2010 status report from Government of Alberta)
- The federal Minister of Environment concedes that:
 - All 13 local populations of boreal caribou in Alberta are at an elevated risk of extirpation given current levels of habitat disturbance and population conditions.
 - Restoring caribou habitat will take a considerable time since their habitat consists of old-growth forests that are 80+ years old
 - Loss of Alberta herds would negatively impact survival of remaining caribou in Canada
 - The Alberta government has failed to manage effects of industrial development in northeastern Alberta on caribou and their habitat
- Virtually none of the new protected spaces designated in Alberta's draft resource development guide – the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan – include critical habitat for caribou survival and recovery

Overlap between oilsands leases and caribou range

*courtesy of Global Forest Watch



-  Caribou Herd Range
-  Oil Sands Leases (Jan 2011)
-  Surface Mineable
-  Oil Sands Admin Area
-  Existing protected areas

