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## **Alberta's Woodland Caribou in Peril**

### ***Newly-revealed Documents Show Scientists Trying to Sound the Alarm***

The plight of Alberta's woodland caribou has become so desperate that Alberta government scientists are recommending that the species be downgraded from a threatened species to an endangered species, according to newly-released documents. Although the province's Scientific Subcommittee recommended the downgrading nearly a year ago, still the government is failing to act.

This is one of the significant findings recently revealed in documents received by Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) through an application under Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) legislation. The newly-revealed documents show considerable friction between the multi-stakeholder Endangered Species Conservation Committee (ESCC) and its own Scientific Subcommittee.

"The scientists are not in any doubt that things are critical for Alberta's caribou," says Cliff Wallis, AWA Vice-President, "but the ESCC, which is populated with industry interests, has stalled actions to protect caribou and their disappearing habitat." Correspondence reveals the Scientific Subcommittee expressing its frustration with the ESCC's "unproductive mix of opinions based on values vs. science," and asking "What should we do when ideology is being cloaked as questions about science?"

The situation for caribou in Alberta is dire, the Scientific Subcommittee stresses: "Most caribou in the province...now occur in subpopulations which are known to be in decline." Of the fourteen populations for which sufficient data exist, one has died out and ten are in decline.

The documents also make it clear that, although the Alberta government's current "woodland recovery planning process" has been operating since September 2001, it has utterly failed to address the caribou's continuing decline. Since 2001, "four previously declining subpopulations are now experiencing more pronounced decline, two previously stable populations are now in decline and four subpopulations for which data were previously unavailable are now known to be in decline."

Despite the urgency of the situation, recent government response to the concerns of scientists has been negligible. A minimalist two-page "woodland caribou policy" produced in June 2011 contains little more than bland references to "planning and "implementation" at some future, undefined, date.

The recommendation to downgrade caribou from threatened to endangered has finally been forwarded to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, Mel Knight. A similar recommendation to list grizzly bears as a threatened species took eight years before it was finally enacted in 2010.

"The entire process seems to be designed to fail," says Nigel Douglas, AWA conservation specialist. "It seems to us that the sectors who have caused the decline of caribou populations in the first place are the ones who create bottlenecks on government advisory committees and recovery teams and work hard to make sure that nothing changes. The caribou are always the losers in these processes."

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