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Federal government writes off Alberta caribou - War on wolves goes national

A long overdue federal woodland caribou recovery strategy released today allows ongoing habitat loss at the hands of Alberta's energy and forestry industries. For the weakest herds in Alberta and across Canada, it leaves the only key management tool as the killing of thousands of wolves. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) finds this approach unacceptable within Species at Risk Act obligations, and calls for habitat protection and restoration for herds throughout their current distribution.

"The plan gives the appearance of doing something," says Cliff Wallis, AWA Vice-President, "but the details read "business as usual" for Alberta oilsands, oil and gas and forestry."

The 2007 stated federal recovery goal, supported by AWA, was: "Boreal caribou are conserved, and recovered to self-sustaining levels, throughout their current distribution (extent of occurrence) in Canada." Yet today's proposed plan writes off the most vulnerable caribou herds, those having lost two-thirds or more habitat due to government stalling on a conservation strategy! For Alberta herds most harmed by intensive oilsands, shale gas and forestry, their intact habitat can dwindle to only 5% as long as there are management actions – (i.e. wolf kills) – aimed at propping up current populations; no other "management actions" except wolf kills have been demonstrated to slow caribou mortality once human disturbance opens access for deer, moose and the wolves that follow. This is a totally irresponsible approach. Instead, science-based land disturbance thresholds are needed to restore and protect their required intact habitat.

The strategy for the northernmost Alberta herds deemed to be part of a national connected corridor is also weak. One part of the strategy implies no new disturbance and restoration of habitat, which is what conservation organizations have been asking for, but another section sets this planning target as flexible over space and time – meaning it can be ignored for decades if inconvenient for industry.

"This proposed recovery strategy dooms these herds, because it has no real habitat protection and restoration requirements. It's about protecting powerful industry, not caribou," says Carolyn Campbell, conservation specialist at AWA.

AWA encourages those who value wildlife and support responsible development to urge Canada to adopt a real recovery strategy during the comment period from now until the end of October 2011.

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