



Release Date: August 29, 2011

Updated Northeast Alberta Plan Confirms Weak Conservation Measures Favouring Oilsands Development

The Alberta government's updated Draft Lower Athabasca Regional Plan confirms irresponsible tar sands development by postponing all land disturbance limits and biodiversity goals, and by actually reducing already insufficient proposed protected woodland caribou habitat. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) believes the plan should contain clear land disturbance and biodiversity targets, including meaningful woodland caribou habitat protection.

“By postponing for at least 2 years the crucial land disturbance and biodiversity plans, not only is caribou and other sensitive species’ survival compromised, but investor certainty is undermined,” says Carolyn Campbell, AWA conservation specialist. “After all the research to date documenting Alberta woodland caribou’s demise, the time for these targets is today.”

According to Global Forest Watch Canada, as of 2010 only 25% of usable habitat remained for the 11 woodland caribou herds in the Lower Athabasca region (two thirds of the disturbance is due to human impacts, the rest to fires). Environment Canada reports that at least 65% intact habitat is necessary for the herds to be self sustaining. Existing protected areas cover only 3% of the caribou ranges in the Lower Athabasca region, and less than 4% additional range would be protected from industry in the proposed regional plan. Another 11% of caribou range would be protected from oilsands activity (though not from industrial forestry) in new public land-use zones; one of these zones in the Red Earth caribou herd range was reduced by 20,000 hectares in today's updated draft plan in response to industry pressure.

The proposed plan makes some progress on surface water quality and air quality limits, but it does not meet many other criteria for cumulative effects management to fulfill Alberta’s international biodiversity obligations. It should protect at least half the region from industrial disturbance, in line with boreal conservation science. It should also motivate faster restoration of disturbed forests via a land disturbance limit and encourage world class sustainable forestry practices outside (not inside) protected areas. “Until effective land disturbance and biodiversity frameworks are produced, this plan will fail to address the cumulative effects of multiple activities, the very reason the Land-Use Framework was developed,” says Campbell.

For more information:

Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist: (403) 283-2025

