

Pilot Conservation Plan for the Redrock-Prairie Creek Mountain Caribou

Executive Summary

Issue: Most woodland caribou populations in Alberta are in decline. The proximal cause is excessive loss of animals to predation (primarily wolves, but also other predators). However, the ultimate cause that has tipped the predator/prey balance is ongoing habitat degradation as a result of timber harvest, extensive and intensive oil and gas development and direct landscape loss to coal and oilsands mining. This habitat degradation in turn improves habitat for other prey (i.e. elk, moose and deer) which increases the number and distribution of wolves to the detriment of caribou. Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD) have been unable to reconcile the conflicting goals of conserving woodland caribou and maximizing economic gain through the development of renewable and non-renewable natural resources. The Alberta Conservation Association is proposing a pilot conservation plan for the Redrock-Prairie Creek (RPC) mountain caribou population in west central Alberta. This pilot plan would support the “*Woodland Caribou Policy for Alberta.*” The pilot plan would require the adoption of previous recommendations developed by a multi-stakeholder committee (West-Central Alberta Caribou Plan) and a new approach to sustainable resource development that attempts to minimize the loss of economic benefits.

Background: Woodland caribou are a unique member of the deer family; both males and females are antlered, they live in old forests, use lichens as their primary food and are adapted to live in areas of deep snow and wet bogs. They naturally have a low reproductive rate and live at very low densities over large expanses of coniferous forests. This strategy allows them to avoid predation by essentially being “lost in space”. They therefore require space to maintain viable populations. Renewable and non-renewable resource development in Alberta has not, to date, provided adequate conditions to allow for woodland caribou persistence. There have been exhaustive attempts by AESRD to mitigate some potential impacts on woodland caribou at the level of individual disposition approvals; however, at the landscape level, policies that allocate timber and oil and gas rights throughout woodland caribou habitat have severely fragmented caribou ranges. As a result almost all caribou populations in the province are in decline. In addition, more recently the mountain pine beetle and associated pine strategies specifically advocates removal of most older pine forests, which are essential for caribou survival.

The RPC population is one of three remaining caribou populations inhabiting provincial lands that are considered a “mountain ecotype” of woodland caribou. These animals migrate to the mountains in the spring and return to winter in the forested foothills. A continual sample of RPC animals have been radiocollared since 1981. In addition there have been 8 graduate students who have conducted research on this population and the wolves that prey on them, making the RPC animals one of the best-studied woodland caribou populations in Canada. The RPC population historically has used Caw Ridge as a staging area for both spring and fall migrations with up to 70% of the population using this route. Within the last decade an open pit mine (currently operated by Grande Cache Coals) has begun to infringe on Caw Pass, the main seasonal migration route. Previous owners of the mining operation demonstrated an interest in developing open-pit mines along the summit of Caw Ridge that would eliminate caribou migration.

Proposed Solutions:

- 1. Adopt the Alberta Caribou Committee's recommendations to the Alberta SRD Resource Directors and their subsequent action plan for west central Alberta caribou recovery (February 2009).**
 - Reduce by 15% the existing percentage of range located within 250m of anthropogenic features.
 - Manage road and linear disturbances to meet the open road density target adopted for grizzly bear management; i.e. open road density shall be kept within +/- 10% of current values.
 - Maintain and/or expand areas of "intactness" (areas not bisected by anthropogenic features).
 - "Grow" intactness zones within the caribou ranges where they currently do not exist.
- 2. Extend the current deferral of timber harvest in the Weyerhaeuser Forest Management Agreement Area for 60 years and compensate the company through "conservation credits".**
- 3. Restrict any further development of oil and gas rights within the RPC range to existing infrastructure (i.e. roads, wellsites, pipelines, but not seismic lines).**
- 4. Extend the timeline in which the oil and gas rights have to be developed to avoid a "Gold Rush" effort by companies (i.e. cause companies to increase activity to meet the 5-year timeline rather than lose their oil and gas rights) and to provide opportunity to develop the technology to "reach out" further from the existing infrastructure.**
- 5. Restrict any further mining on Caw Ridge to underground mining.**