

Energy Industry Disturbances and Leases in Little Smoky Caribou and A La Peche Caribou Ranges: A Step in the Right Direction

Good news! In a significant shift, the Alberta government decided that effective May 1, new mineral rights leasing will be halted in the ranges of the Little Smoky and A La Peche caribou herds in west central Alberta until range plans are developed. Under the federal woodland caribou recovery strategy, Alberta is required to develop comprehensive range plans that explain how habitat will be protected for the 15 caribou populations on provincial lands. In a May 2 letter to Alberta Wilderness Association, Energy Minister Ken Hughes announced the deferral and stated that range plans for these two populations are expected to be approved by Cabinet in 2014. While there remains much to be done to improve habitat, by not increasing new lease pressures, this decision increases the survival chances of these two populations.

The urgent need for this action was underlined again for me in late January 2013. Then I documented some of the new industrial disturbances taking place in the last 5 percent intact area of the Little Smoky caribou herd's range north of Hinton. Only 80 animals in total are estimated to be left in this herd. Ken Cowles, whose trapline is in the area, became very concerned about the impacts to a sub-herd of about 15 animals he saw displaced by the noise and activity. To his credit, Ken had contacted provincial authorities with his concerns and even spoke out in the media. He and I traveled over several townships by snowmobile and observed extensive new roads, well sites, and pipeline corridors – but no caribou.

Industrial disturbance in the Little Smoky (and in other boreal woodland caribou ranges across Alberta) has increased deer and moose populations. It also provides easy passage through the forest, which draws in wolves and robs the caribou of the isolation they need for calf survival. Rather than stop habitat loss and fragmentation, the root cause of caribou decline, the Alberta government has declared war on other wildlife in the Little Smoky range: its ongoing wolf kill program there has shot and poisoned over 650 area wolves from 2005 to spring 2012. To keep moose numbers from exploding in the fragmented forest and drawing in



Map of AWA's Little Smoky Area of Concern. Extensive new surface disturbances were documented by AWA in Alberta townships 59-2 and 59-1 (west of 6th meridian), which had been relatively intact.

even more wolves, it also issues hundreds of moose hunting permits for the Little Smoky each year, far higher numbers than in other parts of Alberta.

On January 31, 2013 the *Edmonton Journal* profiled AWA's concerns that the new disturbances violate Alberta's 2011 caribou policy. On paper, the policy commits to prioritizing maintenance of caribou habitat in order to achieve naturally sustaining woodland caribou populations. In the same article, an Alberta Energy spokesperson was quoted as stating that "infrastructure takes up less than one-half of one per cent of the land within the range of the Smoky Lake herd." This showed a very troubling ignorance by Alberta Energy about the impacts of linear

disturbances on caribou generally, and of the exceedingly high disturbance levels in this area. Ninety-five percent of the range of the Little Smoky caribou population was documented as disturbed in Environment Canada's 2011 and 2012 (draft and final) woodland caribou recovery strategy documents. According to the final federal recovery strategy each herd requires at least 65 percent undisturbed habitat to have even a 60 percent chance of sustaining itself.

AWA wrote to Alberta Energy Minister Ken Hughes about the dire Little Smoky situation on February 6, 2013. We urged him to take action to defer all new petroleum and natural gas-related leasing and surface disturbance until enough habitat



In violation of Alberta's woodland caribou policy, new roads, well sites, and pipeline corridors further degrade the Little Smoky caribou habitat, which is already 95% disturbed.

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can be restored to recover caribou. In particular, we requested that Alberta Energy not proceed with planned auctions of new leases within the Little Smoky range slated for February, March and April. Our letter reads in part: "To keep scapegoating other wildlife, ignoring technological approaches to avoid surface disturbance, and exacerbating the root cause of caribou decline is completely out of balance, and unethical. Minister Hughes, the fate of this caribou herd rests with your decision."

In a news release May 3 that was widely carried in provincial and national media, AWA praised the government's lease deferral and its promise to swiftly develop range plans. We now request that the Alberta government take the complementary step of deferring approval of new forestry plans in these ranges until caribou range plans are developed. We will also keep pressing for the on-the-ground improvement of habitat so urgently needed for Alberta's caribou to survive.

- Carolyn Campbell