

begin range planning for the Cold Lake caribou population. AWA has decided to participate as an Alberta Environmental Network representative in the stakeholder advisory group the Alberta government has set up for the Little Smoky-A La Peche range plan.

Legal action by AWA and partner organizations helped prod the federal government into finishing the strategy, albeit five years past the “mandatory” deadlines required by the Species at Risk Act. The goal is to achieve self-sustaining caribou populations throughout their current distribution in Canada, to the extent possible. The federal government’s boreal caribou scientific advisors stated as recently as February 2012 that recovery of local populations across the country is both biologically and technically feasible. What counts now most of all is political will.

Under strong pressure from Canadians, who submitted 14,000 comments during the consultation period, the federal government significantly improved the final strategy’s management approach compared to the draft version it released in 2011. That early draft strategy proposed killing predator species as a substitute for responsible habitat management in highly disturbed ranges. The final management target for the minimum amount of undisturbed habitat for each caribou range is now 65 percent. Experts estimate this will give threatened populations a 60 percent chance of becoming self-sustaining. Provinces are required to develop range plans to show progress every five years towards the 65 percent undisturbed habitat target. This is vital for Alberta’s caribou populations since all except the Yates herd on the NWT border is already in serious decline and expected to die out in the next several decades if

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### **Better Outlook for the Latest Caribou Range Planning?**

The final federal recovery strategy for boreal woodland caribou was released one year ago, in early October 2012. Alberta is now required to develop range plans for each of 15 caribou populations on provincial lands. In August 2013, the Alberta government announced plans to start to develop a range plan for the Little Smoky and A La Peche caribou populations in west central Alberta. Later this autumn it will

nothing is done. The final strategy gives the highest priority to landscape level planning and to habitat restoration. The prioritization is a crucial reason AWA is participating in this range planning exercise.

Fire and insect disturbance create a natural changing mosaic in the boreal forest. Woodland caribou require extensive ranges to be able to occupy the most suitable intact forest and peatland habitat at low densities; the A La Peche caribou also traditionally moved from summer alpine ranges to forest and peat wetland winter ranges in the foothills. The underlying cause of Alberta's caribou decline is clear: the cumulative effects of habitat disturbance caused by forestry, energy development, and associated infrastructure. Human disturbance not only destroys habitat for caribou, it stimulates populations of prey species such as deer and moose and makes wolf travel easier along roads and cutlines. Increasing prey species increases the wolf population and puts more pressure on the dwindling caribou population. In short, human disturbance robs the caribou of the intact habitat they need to isolate themselves from deer, moose, and the wolves that follow.

The historic range of woodland caribou has decreased greatly in Alberta. Agricultural settlement in southern range areas is part of the story. But, in recent decades, a rapidly expanding industrial footprint within the foothills and boreal forest has meant that smaller, fragmented ranges now exist instead of large connected ranges. Unfortunately, the main management tool in the Little Smoky since winter 2005-06 has been killing wolves. Since 2005 approximately 850

wolves have been killed; as well, significantly higher numbers of moose hunting permits have been issued. Habitat disturbance meanwhile has continued to increase to the point where over 95 percent of the range's habitat is disturbed. This is the highest rate in Canada.

The Little Smoky-A La Peche advisory group will meet from August until February 2014 and provide advice to government. We will build on the knowledge gained from the 2006-2008 West Central Caribou planning process. The Alberta government's decisions in May 2013 to defer new mineral rights sales in these ranges and in July 2013 to reduce planned logging in part of the Little Smoky range prior to range plan development were encouraging signals of a newfound commitment to improve habitat conditions for these populations. AWA's goal in participating in the advisory group is to help achieve self-sustaining caribou populations by focusing on habitat protection and restoration. That's where the management focus belongs.

- Carolyn Campbell

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