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New Roads, Cutblocks and Wells Undermine Little Smoky Caribou Critical Habitat

Significant new disturbance within caribou ranges in west central Alberta is destroying federally protected critical habitat and undermines chances for naturally sustaining caribou populations committed to by Alberta and federal governments. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) echoes residents' concerns about these disturbances even as it looks for solutions within Alberta's Little Smoky - A La Peche caribou range planning process.

Grande Prairie area dentist and hunter/angler Darcy Handy is extremely concerned about the extensive new disturbance he has seen throughout the ranges since late September. "In old growth habitat on three major drainages, logging of extensive cutblocks is occurring, with more being laid out. These areas have gone from caribou habitat worthy of protection to areas that resemble wastelands where no caribou roam." Handy, who has a trapline south of Grand Cache, has documented cutblocks, new roads and well sites destroying intact areas. "How can the Alberta government be allowing this to occur in the current caribou habitat crisis?" he asks.

"New clearcuts and roads in good caribou habitat reduces options and makes caribou recovery even more difficult," says Carolyn Campbell, conservation specialist at AWA. "AWA remains committed to range planning because we see solutions are within reach; there is a great deal of economic opportunity from rethinking natural resources management, by restoring habitat and by extracting hydrocarbons from a reduced footprint. Like Darcy, many residents want a better balance where there is a good economy and a future for caribou."

The federal government's boreal woodland caribou strategy, finalized October 2012, requires provinces to develop range plans for woodland caribou survival that must describe how critical habitat will be protected to attain a minimum of 65% undisturbed habitat over time, and provide a range-specific path forward for the recovery of that caribou population.

Industrial disturbance of caribou habitat is recognized as the underlying driver of steep declines in Alberta's caribou populations. The Little Smoky range currently has less than 5% undisturbed habitat. AWA praised the Alberta government in summer 2013 for a one year deferral of some new logging in the Little Smoky range, and for deferring new mineral lease sales in the Little Smoky and neighbouring A La Peche ranges until range plans are completed. The extensive new permitted disturbance erodes these gains.

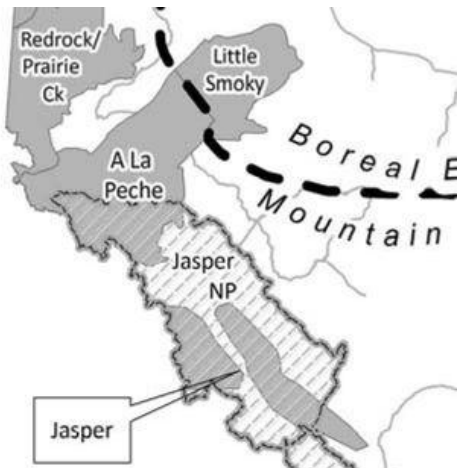
For more information:

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

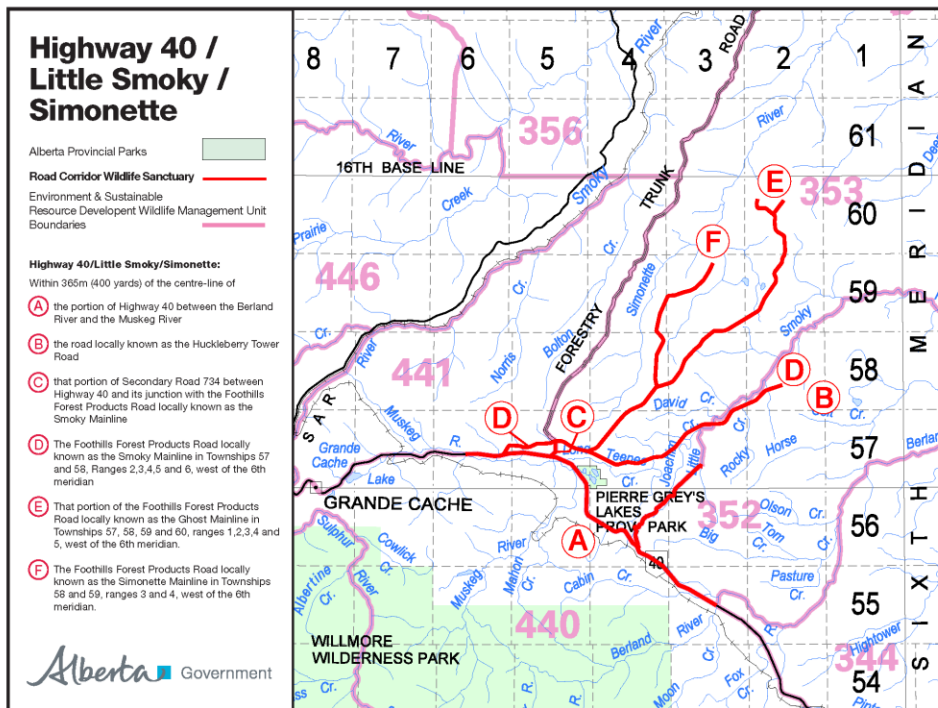
Darcy Handy, area resident and hunter/angler/trapper, (780) 933-1150 (mobile)

Attached: Photos of new disturbance. Maps of Little Smoky - A La Peche caribou ranges and major roads.





Map 1: A La Peche and Little Smoky caribou population ranges in west-central Alberta. (Map sources cited at end)



Map 2: Major roads in Little Smoky-A La Peche caribou ranges. Photos below show new disturbance off road 'E' above, the Ghost Mainline road.





Photo 1: Recent logging up the Ghost Mainline. Photo November 27, 2013. Credit: D. Handy

Logging replaces the old growth intact forest, which caribou prefer, with young forest that provides ideal food for deer and moose. Increased 'prey' populations draw in wolves, making it much more difficult for caribou to remain isolated from predators.



Photo 2: Recent logging up the Ghost Mainline. Photo November 27, 2013. Credit: D. Handy.





Photo 3: Recent site clearing at what was once the end of a spur road off the Ghost Mainline. Photo November 27, 2013. Credit: D. Handy.

One driver of demand for the liquids rich gas in this area is to produce diluent to transport bitumen from oil sands projects. Energy industry footprint provides corridors for wolves to travel into formerly difficult-to-access caribou range. AWA believes that with directional drilling and better planning, energy footprint can be reduced rather than expand.



Photo 3: New 8 km road into formerly intact area, off a spur road of the Ghost Mainline. Photo November 27, 2013. Credit: D. Handy.





References:

Map 1 Source: Alberta Government (2010). Status of the Woodland Caribou, p. 3
www.srd.alberta.ca/Fishwildlife/SpeciesAtRisk/DetailedStatus/Mammals/documents/Status-WoodlandCaribou-inAlberta-Jul-2010.pdf

Map 2 Source: Government of Alberta, 2012.
<http://mywildalberta.com/Hunting/Regulations/documents/RCWSmap-Hwy40-LittleSmoky-Simonette-2012.pdf>

