

For Sale (again): Petroleum Leases to Endangered Caribou Habitat

Since May the evidence has been steadily mounting that Alberta's decisions regarding caribou habitat ignore science, Alberta's own stated caribou policy, and public opinion. In early May, Alberta's 'mountain' caribou were assessed as *Endangered* – in immediate danger of extinction – by Canada's *Species at Risk Act* scientist advisors (Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada – COSEWIC). Yet Alberta barged ahead and auctioned 1,500 hectares of new oil and gas leases in mountain caribou ranges from May to early June. More sales are on the horizon. From late June to early August, the government plans to auction 1,000 more hectares of land in endangered mountain caribou habitat; it plans to auction another 1,400 hectares in threatened boreal caribou ranges further north.

Alberta's project-level 'guidelines' enable an expanding surface disturbance on leases. They are far too weak for caribou survival as shown by widespread declines in caribou populations. The news of these lease sales sparked a strong negative reaction across a broad spectrum of Alberta opinion. Alberta's two major daily newspapers, wilderness and fish and game groups, and all three opposition parties called for a halt to lease auctions in these ranges until responsible rules are in place to ensure caribou survival.

Alberta's mountain caribou populations live in west central Alberta and migrate between mountain summer habitat, some of which is protected, and unprotected foothills habitat that is under intensive industrial pressure. Habitat disturbance by forestry cutblocks and energy seismic lines, roads, and pipelines is a boon for deer and moose and the predators that follow. This dynamic robs the caribou of their ability to

minimize overlap with predators. Caribou and wolves have co-existed over thousands of years but industrial disturbance boosts predation beyond what the caribou can endure. Mountain caribou populations have decreased by more than 60 percent since 2002, just 12 years.

The federal government released its final recovery strategy for southern mountain caribou (which includes all Alberta mountain caribou) in early June. This strategy requires developing plans to manage ranges to achieve at least 65 percent undisturbed foothills winter habitat. In the Narraway and Redrock-Prairie Creek herd ranges, where oil and gas leasing continues, habitat disturbance as of 2010 was estimated at over 80 percent and at roughly 50 percent respectively.

Extensive new disturbance from forestry and energy development marches on within the ranges and important buffer zone areas of Alberta's boreal woodland caribou herds to the north. In 2012 the federal boreal caribou strategy required provinces to make progress towards at least 65 percent undisturbed habitat within these ranges as well. Scientists assessing northeast Alberta populations warned in 2009 that these boreal caribou populations will not survive for more than a few decades unless the current decision-making course is reversed.

Scientists have stated that recovery of these caribou is technically and biologically possible. AWA has noted that solutions are within reach if energy operators are required to use directional drilling technology and pooled leases to reduce the existing footprint and to comprehensively reclaim the historic footprint. The missing ingredients remain corporate and political will.

- Carolyn Campbell