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Today's Alberta Sales of Endangered Caribou Habitat Ignore Public Opposition and Science

Despite opposition from Alberta's three main opposition parties, two major daily newspapers, and major hunting and wilderness organizations, more endangered caribou habitat will be auctioned today by the Alberta government for new oil and gas leases. The leases in 264 hectares of endangered mountain caribou range in west central Alberta and 264 hectares of threatened boreal caribou range in northeast Alberta allow new surface disturbance, making survival chances even worse for the caribou. The Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) asks for a halt to new energy leasing in endangered caribou ranges until effective rules to protect the herds are in place.

"Alberta's caribou will soon disappear without new rules, whereas mineral resources will not go away and can be extracted with a greatly reduced footprint compatible with caribou", says Carolyn Campbell, AWA conservation specialist. "The Alberta government has it backwards by making caribou wait for range plans to be developed, while not pausing oil and gas leasing in their ranges."

Today's new leases, with ineffective project-level guidelines, will further harm caribou whose habitat is well past the 35% disturbance limit that is supposed to be upheld by Alberta under the federal *Species at Risk Act*. The endangered Narraway herd faces over 80% disturbed habitat, the threatened West Side of Athabasca River herd faces over 70% disturbed habitat. Industry disturbance levels past the limits that caribou can tolerate rob them of their ability to minimize contact with wolves and other predators.

Statements by Danielle Smith of the Wildrose party, Laurie Blakeman of the Liberals, Rachel Notley of the New Democrats, the Edmonton Journal, Calgary Herald and the Alberta Fish and Game Association have called for a halt to auctions in these ranges since mountain caribou populations were assessed as 'Endangered' in early May – excerpts from these statements are below.

Scientists have stated that recovery of these caribou is technically and biologically possible: under Canada's *Species at Risk Act*, Alberta must develop range plans outlining how habitat will be maintained and restored, yet the new energy lease sales with weak guidelines go in the opposite direction.

"Solutions are within reach using tools such as directional drilling and pooled leases," says Campbell. "Real rules for caribou survival could see significant energy extraction on a reduced footprint accompanied by 'pay to stay' comprehensive habitat restoration."

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Excerpts from written statements:

Danielle Smith, Wildrose Party Leader, May 28, 2014: "Thank you for expressing your concerns over the Government of Alberta's recent decision to sell off the last remaining habitat for the Narraway and Redrock-Prairie Creek mountain caribou herds. This decision appears callous and disregards the need to





demonstrate to world markets our commitment to developing energy in an environmentally responsible way... I will continue to hold this government accountable for its decisions that endanger an at-risk species and will press for answers as to how this decision was made without due diligence and consideration for the health of endangered caribou.”

Laurie Blakeman, Environment critic, Alberta Liberal Party, May 14, 2014: “The government is selling lands today on which almost 200 [caribou] live, effectively driving these animals off their ranges. They cannot expect Albertans to believe their claims that the decision is not going to have a serious negative impact on an already endangered species. Given that just last week, the federal government said that those herds should be assessed as endangered. I think it is incumbent on the government to explain to Albertans how this massive land sale fits into that reality.”

Rachel Notley, Environment critic, Alberta New Democratic Party, May 14, 2014: “By allowing ...oil and gas development to proceed unchecked in this area, the government would be further endangering a herd that is already endangered. We need to balance the needs of development with the needs of a clean, diverse environment—not go full speed ahead when we could cause untold damage.”

Calgary Herald Editorial, May 15, 2014: “ ‘We can’t try and fix what’s happening with respect to their habitat without actually holding off with new disturbance,’ says [scientist Justina] Ray, who adds that maintaining the herds is vital for the genetic diversity of caribou in Alberta and British Columbia. Ray’s assessment needs to be acknowledged by Alberta Energy and an immediate halt put to the land auction, which impacts two herds consisting of 178 animals in total. After all, Alberta Energy itself recognizes that caribou herds are threatened in the province and has delayed lease sales in other caribou ranges. Given the precarious state of the animals, the government needs to make protection of the caribou a priority, even if it does occur belatedly.”

Edmonton Journal Editorial, May 15, 2014: “Albertans should not accept that its endangered and threatened caribou are goners. To sit back for another decade and give only lip service to protection would be a tragedy. The first step must be to put an immediate halt to mineral lease sales and logging — at a bare minimum within all ranges of Alberta’s mountain caribou — until science-based range plans are adopted.”

Gord Poirier, President, Alberta Fish & Game Association, May 27, 2014: “Our organization is dismayed by the continued reckless sell-off of prime habitat that is vital for the recovery of the woodland caribou. There is no way that the government with their projected return of a balanced budget needs the funds these leases will bring. There seems to be a move by government to divest itself of critical habitat before their own land use frame work plans are implemented.”

