



Release Date: August 11, 2008

Alberta's "Serengeti" Under Threat Alberta Wilderness Association Calls For Public Inquiry

The threat of coal extraction within significant wildlife habitat in northwest Alberta demands a public inquiry, says Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) as the menace of strip-mining looms over a diversity of species, including the threatened caribou, grizzly, and bull trout.

Caw Ridge, 20 km northwest of Grande Cache, Alta., has been called the "Serengeti of Alberta" for its rich and diverse wildlife populations. The area has faced the threat of coal mining since the 1970s, and it is time for Albertans to inform the government of their interests in this significant landscape containing critical wildlife habitat.

"The time has come for the people of this province to have a say in the future of Caw Ridge," says Chris Wearmouth, AWA conservation specialist. "With the extensive habitat loss and fragmentation in Alberta, it is time we reconsider if we're willing to sacrifice some of Alberta's richest habitat for a broad spectrum of Rocky Mountain wildlife."

AWA has written to Premier Stelmach requesting a broad and meaningful public inquiry, open to all Albertans, interested parties, and representative interest groups. As part of this inquiry, AWA asks that a cumulative impact assessment be commissioned to examine the effects of all activities, including industry, on the habitat and wildlife of Caw Ridge and adjacent lands and streams.

Grande Cache Coal has begun a new program of exploratory drilling for its #16 Mine, which includes Caw Ridge. While this summer's work, located east of Caw Ridge, may be a small piece of the overall plan, future exploration along the north slope of the ridge is planned, with possible open pit mining to follow.

Caw Ridge, promoted as a wildlife viewing site by Sustainable Resource Development (SRD), provides significant habitat for "one of the most diverse assemblies of large mammals in Alberta," according to the SRD website. Home to one of the largest herds of mountain goats in the province, the area also provides habitat for moose, deer, wolves, and grizzly bears – the last whose numbers are estimated to be below 500 in Alberta, significantly lower than previously thought.

Caw Ridge also bisects the migration route of the Redrock–Prairie Creek herd of caribou, a species listed as "threatened" under Alberta's *Wildlife Act*. Although this herd is currently listed as "stable," further development could jeopardize its security by impeding travel between its seasonal ranges. The nearby Little Smoky caribou herd has dwindled to the point of likely extirpation under habitat pressures exerted from resource development.

According to Steeve Côté of Laval University, who has studied Caw Ridge's mountain goats for more than two decades, the impacts of exploratory drilling, road building, and mining operations not only jeopardizes caribou migration routes, but will also affect mountain goat and grizzly bear habitat. "Many of these effects will be irreversible, so Caw Ridge should be protected from all form of industrial activities," says Côté.

The call for a public inquiry is not new. The Energy Resources Conservation Board (then the Energy Utilities Board) started the process in 1999 with Grande Cache Coal's predecessor, Smoky River Coal. However, the company went bankrupt and the inquiry was deferred. Until the inquiry is complete, AWA is requesting that no new approvals be issued for current or future exploration or development projects.

Contact: Chris Wearmouth, AWA (403) 283-2025

