

# West Central Alberta Caribou: Range Plan Slowdowns, Yet Solutions Within Reach

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While Alberta delays completing caribou range plans, AWA has helped postpone significant new energy leasing in an endangered mountain caribou range. An auction planned for March 12 did not proceed. This auction would have leased 21,000 hectares (212 square kilometres) in a relatively undisturbed area of the Redrock-Prairie Creek mountain caribou range in the Kakwa region of west central Alberta. Under Alberta's current ineffective surface disturbance guidelines, lease sales promote more seismic lines, more well sites, and more roads by new leaseholders. These sales make the dire survival chances for caribou even worse.

On March 5, AWA publicly called on the Alberta government to defer lease sales until effective caribou range plans are in place. The next day the government postponed those particular Redrock-Prairie Creek sales. An Alberta Energy spokesperson stated: "That gives us a little more time to take a look at the issue and do our due diligence ... because Albertans are very aware of some of the challenges concerning caribou, and government shares that concern." AWA was quick to praise this decision, while adding that much more action is needed.

Habitat disturbance continues to increase in Alberta caribou ranges. This advance is ongoing three years after the federal caribou recovery strategy gave provinces three to five years to develop range plans to steadily reduce disturbance. It's no mystery why Alberta's caribou are in trouble. Our mountain and boreal woodland caribou

populations are declining due to intensive forestry clearcuts and energy industry surface disturbance. This industrialization stimulates deer and moose numbers and, therefore, wolf predation. Caribou are collateral damage in this dynamic; wolves prey on too many caribou – far more than what healthy caribou populations need. As of early April, new energy leasing continues in all but two caribou ranges on Alberta public lands. Incoherently, leases are still offered in the Redrock-Prairie Creek range outside of the deferred parcel and in the adjacent Narraway range.

In March, AWA highlighted an innovative 2012 plan proposed by the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) for the Redrock-Prairie Creek-Narraway ranges. The ACA plan is hospitable to energy development but...with strong rules to reduce surface disturbance dramatically in order to promote caribou recovery. Underground coal mining would be permitted; further surface disturbance by coal mining would be prohibited. It also proposes continued long-term timber harvest deferral, with compensation for the affected leaseholder. This is a great example of more responsible caribou range management that the Alberta government can and should choose. That plan did not receive its due in 2012; now is a prime opportunity for decision makers to take a serious look at it.

Meanwhile, the Alberta government's own multi-stakeholder caribou range plan process is, at best, dormant. The west central Little Smoky and A La Pêche caribou ranges, to the southeast of Redrock-Prairie Creek, are the first Alberta ranges chosen for range

plan development under the federal caribou recovery strategy. A multi-stakeholder Advisory Group, including AWA and other ENGO delegates, aboriginal groups, industry, and municipalities was launched with great promise in August 2013. The advisory group was co-led by Assistant Deputy Ministers from Alberta's Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD) and Energy departments and set early 2014 as the target date for submitting completed range plans. We all know what year it is now. AWA saw great collaborative potential in the multi-stakeholder group. This opportunity to transparently model scenarios to optimize habitat-focused range management was squandered. Its last meeting was December 2014 and there are no meetings on the horizon. While the Alberta government continues to develop these range plans it does so without including environmental groups. We hope Ministers Phillips



Excerpt of Alberta Woodland Caribou Range map, showing west central range areas with diagonal lines. Protected areas, shown in green and grey, overlap with some caribou range summer habitat but do not include important lower-elevation foothills winter habitat on Alberta public lands.

MAP CREDIT: GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA, 2013.

and McCuaig-Boyd will see the folly in this approach.

Solutions are within reach. A large forest harvest deceleration is coming soon in west central forestry tenure areas because of the mountain pine beetle surge cuts. While caribou still hang on, the deceleration is needed now. Ending logging in caribou ranges should be accompanied by regional sharing of logging quotas outside of these ranges in order to more evenly distribute economic impacts. AWA would prefer industry-free areas for caribou while habitat recovers, however, some energy industry activity might be compatible with caribou recovery. But the content of that activity must change. More flexible tenure terms and much stricter surface disturbance limits would motivate lease pooling, infrastructure sharing, and longer distance directional drilling. These changes to the way business is done currently in these ranges would help to prevent pipeline, seismic line, and road disturbance from growing while spurring restoration actions.

The Little Smoky and A La Pêche ranges are the site of Alberta ESRD's wolf kill program, now finishing its 10th winter season. The aerial gunning and strychnine program has killed 1,000 wolves. At best, this shoot and poison program has stabilized the two

caribou populations at about 200 animals. AWA has repeatedly stated that it is highly unethical to kill 100 healthy wolves per year while promoting land uses that stimulate deer, moose, and wolf populations. Under these conditions, wolf populations quickly rebound, leaving caribou with worse long-term prospects in ever more degraded habitat. AWA also has opposed the strychnine use, raising concerns about bykill to other species from poison baits checked only every eight days on average. The gunning program also extends into the Willmore Wilderness protected area. The Willmore's wildlife too pay an unacceptable price for the irresponsible land use practices occurring outside its boundaries.

By now, even the province's adjusted 'early 2015' target for Alberta's first two range plans will not be met. This is a big concern for at least two reasons. First, caribou are in a precarious, dire situation and we need to start now on the decades long job of improving their forest habitat. Second, it will be a complex task to create range plans for Alberta's other caribou populations across west central, northwest and northeast Alberta. The year 2017, just two years away, is the federal deadline for completed range plans outlining how habitat will be managed to achieve at least a 65 percent undis-

turbed level. Under federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) provisions, the Canadian government will assess whether there is effective protection of critical habitat in a range plan. It would likely harm the social license of Alberta's energy and forestry industries if the range plans fail this test. Alberta needs to finish these first two range plans and start on the rest.

Is caribou recovery worth the effort? In AWA's opinion, the answer is an unequivocal "yes." Scientists have stated that recovery of woodland caribou is technically and biologically possible. Woodland caribou are marvellously adapted alpine-foothills and boreal mammals. Alberta caribou have a right to recover and thrive in our prosperous province and are important lynchpins for the connectivity of national populations. Our caribou are important indicators of the health and intactness of the older forests and peat wetland complexes in which they reside. If we ensure that caribou have a future in Alberta, many other old growth and wetlands-reliant species will benefit. In west central Alberta, the relatively high, wet foothills forests will provide important 'refuge' areas from climate change impacts. There is no better place to start with strong, habitat-centred caribou range plans. ▲



*Alberta's woodland caribou are important indicators of the health and intactness of the older forests and peat wetland complexes in which they reside. Their recovery is possible, according to scientists, with habitat-focused range plans. PHOTO: © D. CRAIG*