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Good Interim Steps for Alberta Caribou, Strong Range Plans Needed

Since its election a year ago, the Alberta government has deferred new energy leasing throughout Alberta's endangered woodland caribou ranges and paused logging in highly disturbed Little Smoky-A La Peche caribou ranges in west central Alberta, but it has not issued any range plans that under federal law must be completed by 2017. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) welcomes the positive interim steps, and calls on the government to finalize range plans that protect and restore habitat to put Alberta's endangered caribou on the path to recovery.

"We are pleased with the interim decisions made in the past year," says Carolyn Campbell, AWA conservation specialist. "Even more important will be range plans that provide assurance habitat will steadily improve for Alberta's endangered caribou rather than continue to be degraded."

After the October 2012 federal caribou recovery strategy gave provinces 5 years to devise plans to manage habitat to achieve self-sustaining populations, previous Alberta governments issued 7500 km² of new energy leases in caribou ranges with no meaningful surface disturbance limits. The current government auctioned an additional 740 km² within ranges, but since late July 2015 has deferred further in-range sales.

West central Alberta's Little Smoky – A La Peche caribou ranges are highly degraded due to intensive forestry and energy industry impacts; since 2005, a controversial wolf cull scapegoats predators while habitat worsens. Prior Alberta governments allowed clearcuts approved by mid-2013 to proceed in Little Smoky-A La Peche, including 25 km² by Alberta Newsprint Company alone.

Caribou habitat solutions are within reach. Energy companies can aggregate and greatly reduce their surface footprint while extracting resources. AWA believes Alberta could place total surface disturbance limits within ranges, and could provide companies alternatives to prove tenure, to encourage longer-distance directional drilling and pooling of leases.

"We also believe Alberta could require forestry companies to share timber quotas outside ranges (including buffer zones around the smaller ranges) to fairly share the burden of ending in-range logging. Extensive reforestation crews financed by energy companies could significantly cushion impacts to municipalities," said Carolyn Campbell.

Energy and forestry footprint in caribou ranges stimulates deer, moose, and predator populations, robbing the caribou of their ability to minimize overlap with predators. Provincial scientists assessed Alberta woodland caribou as 'endangered' in 2010, though the province has not yet updated their listing from 'threatened'. Caribou recovery is both technically and biologically feasible, according to scientists. AWA is calling on the Alberta government to take decisive steps and make it happen.

For more information:

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