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Alberta Caribou plans: Boreal blockbuster, Foothills fiasco

Today the Alberta government made a historic decision to protect extensive areas of four endangered woodland caribou ranges in its far north, while it further jeopardized recovery of two endangered caribou populations in the west central foothills by proposing to restart logging. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) welcomes the significant achievement for caribou conservation in the north, and urges better solutions that are available for Little Smoky – A La Peche foothills caribou.

"We have mixed feelings today," says Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist. "The northern protection is a superb decision for those caribou populations, and the foothills seismic line and access plan promises to eventually restore significant habitat. Yet it is truly awful to see the government resort to zoos to fence in wild caribou, and propose more old forest be removed and fragmented in the next 5 years by restarting logging and by omitting hard limits on fracking-related land disturbance."

Companies with tenures or quotas in foothills ranges of Little Smoky – A La Peche (LS-ALP) caribou include: Alberta Newsprint Company (owned by Stern Partners and West Fraser), Foothills Forest Products (owned by C & C Wood Products), West Fraser, Millar Western, and Canfor. AWA has praised the Alberta government for halting logging in LS-ALP caribou ranges so far in 2016. Alberta should require forestry companies to share timber allocations outside of LS-ALP ranges and 20 km buffer zone areas to minimize impacts to communities of ending logging within the ranges and buffer zones. "A major logging deceleration is inevitable after mountain pine beetle surge cuts are exhausted," says Campbell. "We need logging in the small ranges and buffer zones to end now, while we still have caribou. It's positive and necessary to put historic disturbance on a trajectory to eventual recovery, but that doesn't justify new logging and undetermined new energy infrastructure that increases hazard before other restoration benefits are actually realized."

Excessive 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. Although Little Smoky-A La Peche ranges have high disturbance levels now due to forestry and energy industries' combined impacts, these forests can recover to be important 'climate change' refuges supporting self-sustaining caribou populations and other wildlife.

The new protected areas would bring Alberta much closer to effective northwestern caribou range plans. AWA believes that clear surface disturbance limits inside and outside these protected areas, compatible with caribou recovery, will still be necessary. Alberta is mandated by federal law to complete plans that effectively protect caribou habitat by October 2017. AWA has praised the Alberta government's mid-2015 decision to defer new energy leasing throughout Alberta's endangered woodland caribou ranges.

For more information:

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Attachments: AWA ratings of LS-ALP draft range plan; Map of AB caribou ranges and protected areas





AWA Ratings of Little Smoky – A La Peche Caribou Draft Range Plan proposals

(compared to federal boreal caribou recovery strategy examples of range plan performance indicators):

	Federal Government Indicator	Little Smoky-A La Peche Draft Range Plan – AWA Rating Report Card
Ultimate	Self-sustaining local populations throughout the entirety of their distribution in Canada	Poor – ‘Self-sustaining’ becomes more difficult in next 5 years because more logging and indeterminate new fracking-related land disturbance is proposed. Solutions: Hard caps and explicit phased reductions on existing energy footprint, plus sharing timber supply outside ranges/buffer zones to enable in-range and buffer zone logging to end, would considerably improve this rating.
General	Complete range plans for each range within 3-5 years of the posting of this recovery strategy	OK - On track to complete LS-ALP by deadline. Quality of plan and implementation is a concern.
Population	Maintain current distribution of boreal caribou across Canada. Achieve and/or maintain a stable to increasing population trend as measured over five years (i.e. $\lambda \geq$ stable) or other empirical data that indicates population trend is stable or increasing. Achieve a minimum of 100 animals for boreal caribou ranges with population estimates of less than 100 animals, or show progress towards this goal every five years.	Poor - Underlying causes of predation (disturbed habitat) are allowed to worsen in next 5 years. This has increased and will prolong reliance on artificial measures to reduce excessive predation: caribou zoo to fence in wild caribou, and continued wolf kill.
Habitat	For ranges with less than 65% undisturbed habitat, identify in a range and/or action plan specific areas of existing undisturbed habitat, as well as those areas where future habitat is to be restored to an undisturbed condition over reasonable, gradual increments every five years.	Poor – Positive to place seismic lines on a trajectory to eventual recovery. Positive that a central area will not have clearcuts. However, restarting logging and indeterminate energy disturbance will increase hazard before other restoration benefits are actually achieved and verified. Solutions: Hard caps and explicit phased reductions on existing energy footprint, plus sharing timber supply outside ranges/buffer zones to enable in-range and buffer zone logging to end, would considerably improve this rating.
Habitat	Provide measurements of disturbance for each range that reflect the best available information, as provided by the provinces and territories, to update the recovery strategy accordingly every five years.	Poor – Positive to recognize ‘Initially Restored Habitat’. However, ignores ‘Disturbed Habitat’ indicator that is based on best available science in favour of riskier ‘Effective Habitat’ and ‘Restored habitat’ concepts.





Map: Alberta Caribou Ranges and New Announced Protected Areas, June 8, 2016

