

Historic Woodland Caribou Draft Range Plan Released



By Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist

In June 2016, the Alberta government released a draft of its first federally-required woodland caribou range plan for public comment. The draft range plan covers west central Little Smoky and A La Peche (LS-ALP) caribou populations. At the same time, it announced a historic decision to protect extensive areas of four other endangered woodland caribou ranges in its far north. In choosing our news release banner of “Boreal Blockbuster, Foothills Fiasco”, AWA applauded the significant caribou conservation achievement

in the north. However, we couldn't support the LS-ALP range plan as drafted because it will continue to destroy critical caribou habitat in the near term, by allowing in-range logging to resume and by omitting hard limits on new surface disturbance by the energy industry. In the public comment period that ended August 5, AWA urged Albertans to ask for better solutions that are available for Little Smoky and A La Peche caribou.

Industrial disturbance in caribou ranges stimulates deer, moose, and predator pop-

ulations while increasing predator hunting efficiency. As a result, caribou lose their ability to minimize overlap with predators. The best available science suggests that woodland caribou habitat is considered 'disturbed' if it is within 500 metres of industrial features such as cutblocks, seismic lines or roads. Woodland caribou require a minimum of 65 percent undisturbed habitat in their range to have a better-than-even chance of being self-sustaining.

AWA has called for better protection of Little Smoky region caribou habitat since the early 1980s, yet successive provincial governments over-allocated logging quotas and auctioned off extensive areas of surface-access energy leases. By 2011 the Little Smoky range was reported as 95 percent disturbed, yet logging and new energy-related surface disturbance continued. That same year, AWA played an important role in obtaining a court directive for the federal government to release its long-overdue boreal woodland caribou recovery strategy under the *Species at Risk Act*. This recovery strategy, finalized in 2012, has real potential to support caribou recovery by focusing on the need to achieve and maintain a minimum of 65 percent undisturbed habitat within each range.

The Alberta government chose the Little Smoky – A La Peche as the first caribou populations for developing its range plans under the federal recovery strategy. In 2013-14, AWA was an ENGO delegate to the province's LS-ALP multi-sector advisory group. We sought to examine scenarios collaboratively, in order to optimize ecological and socio-economic choices for a range



Woodland caribou are magnificently adapted to their boreal and mountain-foothills ranges, but require intact older forest and wetlands to minimize the impact of predators.

Photo: © G. GRUENEWALD.

plan, but this did not occur. In early 2015, ENGOs and indigenous communities were excluded while the government developed a Ministerial Task Force range plan report that contained only forestry and energy industries' input.

The range planning process improved greatly in December 2015. All in-range logging was deferred. A mediator was appointed by the Alberta Environment and Parks minister, and ENGOs and indigenous communities were included again in consultations and information sharing. Even though it still falls short on some crucial elements needed for self-sustaining caribou, the draft LS-ALP range plan released in June is a very significant improvement over the biased Ministerial Task Force process. For example, an extensive seismic line reclamation program has been agreed to; new logging is more strictly confined on the landscape for 5 years; and Alberta Energy will reduce the need for leaseholders to disturb the land in order to prove tenure.

In late September AWA was encouraged further by Alberta Energy's announcement that it was placing an interim restriction on the sale of mineral rights within caribou ranges in Alberta. We are still concerned, however, about what the department's

statement about "stringent operating practices" will mean on the ground and how it will contribute to the reaching the 65 per cent threshold.

Nonetheless, the draft plan doesn't go far enough. Proposed new logging will continue to destroy critical caribou habitat. Logging can restart almost immediately, even ahead of a final cabinet-approved range plan. AWA also opposes the proposed 100 square kilometre 'caribou zoo' to fence in wild caribou as another way to facilitate even more near-term critical habitat destruction. Under the draft plan, yearlings will be released from the fenced enclosure into even more degraded habitat with worse survival prospects for their offspring, suggesting no end in sight to the extensive wolf cull program either.

Instead, we urge Alberta to maintain existing caribou critical habitat while minimizing impacts to local communities. Forestry companies with tenures or quotas within LS-ALP caribou ranges 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. Logging by these companies must end within LS-ALP ranges and should also end in 20 km buffer zone areas around these small ranges. To minimize job impacts, forestry companies in the region

should be required to share their considerable adjacent timber allocations. A major regional logging deceleration is inevitable after unsustainable (and, in AWA's view, ineffective) ongoing mountain pine beetle surge cuts are exhausted; logging must end in-range while caribou still remain.

Energy fracking activity in this region continues to be high due to liquids-rich gas deposits; these deposits are extracted and processed into products such as condensate for transporting oil sands bitumen. Given significant advances in directional drilling, and existing fiscal tools for pooling and joint development of leases, significant energy resources can be extracted in the near term with essentially no new footprint. For the energy industry, the LS-ALP range plan should be strengthened with specific declining limits on disturbed habitat, so as to optimize existing infrastructure use, innovation, and reclamation efforts.

Alberta is required by the federal recovery strategy to produce SARA-compliant range plans for all its caribou populations by October 2017. AWA will continue to urge better solutions for precedent-setting Little Smoky – A La Peche foothills caribou and for Alberta's other endangered caribou populations. ▲



The draft Little Smoky – A La Peche caribou range plan proposes to restart in-range logging so more caribou critical habitat will be destroyed. This May 2016 photo illustrates the greatly expanding surface impacts of industry in the region: these mature trees were cleared and piled 15 feet high in an Alberta Newsprint Company site just northeast of the Little Smoky caribou range. Photo: © C. CAMPBELL.