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Energy Lease Deadline Extensions Positive for Alberta Caribou

Alberta's department of Energy has extended its "use it or lose it" deadlines for drilling requirements for oil sands, oil, gas and mineral operators within every Alberta caribou range until March 2019. Alberta Wilderness Association welcomes this step to support caribou recovery, and requests that stringent limits on new surface disturbance in caribou ranges also be adopted soon.

"It's a great short-term step for the government not to "force" surface disturbance in caribou ranges during the next several drilling seasons by companies that want to delay this activity anyways," says Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist. "However, with considerable caribou habitat loss still occurring under today's weak operating guidelines, the 'stringent operating practices' recently promised by the province for the energy industry remain urgent to adopt, for caribou survival."

According to Alberta Energy's [Information Letter 2016-34](#) of November 4, 2016, holders of oil, gas, oil sands and industrial minerals tenures can apply to extend their tenures until March 31, 2019. "AWA also requests that the government commit to track and report where and how much disturbance is deferred, so Albertans can understand what are the actual benefits to caribou of the lease extensions," says Campbell.

AWA praised the Alberta government's September 2016 decision to stop selling mineral rights in all caribou ranges "until stringent operating practices have been defined." By contrast, the government's first draft woodland caribou range plan of June 2016, developed for west central Alberta's Little Smoky-A La Peche caribou, omitted specific limits on new energy industry disturbance, even though current disturbance far exceeds what caribou can tolerate. Alberta is mandated by federal law to complete plans that effectively protect caribou habitat by October 2017.

Excessive energy and forestry disturbance in caribou ranges stimulates deer, moose and predator populations, robbing the caribou of their ability to minimize overlap with predators. It takes decades to restore habitat. AWA believes clear surface disturbance limits are essential and may mean the energy industry will need to share existing infrastructure and pool leases. Provincial scientists assessed Alberta woodland caribou as 'endangered' in 2010, though the province has not yet updated their listing from 'threatened'.

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