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Canadian environment ministers must protect caribou habitat

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TORONTO — Conservation groups are calling on federal, provincial and territorial environment ministers to act quickly to recover Canada's imperilled woodland caribou herds through habitat measures. The call comes in advance of the environment ministers' meeting in Ottawa February 21 to 22.

It has been almost five years since the federal government released the boreal woodland caribou recovery strategy under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). The strategy developed a threshold of risk for managing caribou, and guides provinces to maintain or restore each caribou range so that at least 65 per cent of it is undisturbed, as caribou need undisturbed habitat to avoid predators and survive. The recovery strategy calls for range plans to be completed by October 2017 that demonstrate the protection, maintenance and restoration of caribou habitat for each caribou herd.

Yet, across Canada, industrial activities such as mining, oil and gas and logging continue to disturb critical caribou habitat. For example, even though the habitat of west central Alberta's Little Smoky range is over 95 per cent disturbed, the province released a draft range plan that allows new logging and oil and gas surface disturbance. In Ontario and Quebec, logging continues to degrade intact caribou habitat.

A recent article in *Biological Conservation* concluded that Canada will likely lose more than half its woodland caribou populations within a few decades unless habitat conservation measures are improved — especially in Western Canada where energy industry activity is heavy.

“Clear science exists to guide caribou recovery, yet we continue to see provinces allowing habitat destruction while engaging in band-aid solutions such as predator control and zoo-like enclosures,” said Rachel Plotkin of the David Suzuki Foundation “If we are to have wild caribou in the future, habitat protection and restoration need to be kicked to the top of the action list.”

Conservation groups believe the economy can work for both caribou and industry. Tenure and lease systems can be realigned to reduce pressure on critical caribou habitat, some activities can be confined to existing disturbed areas, and restoration initiatives can be implemented in areas where habitat has already exceeded disturbance thresholds.

Protection and restoration of caribou habitat will have impacts beyond caribou recovery; the boreal forest on which caribou depend stores significant carbon and provides homes and resting places for hundreds of other species, such as migratory birds.

“To uphold our wildlife laws and commitments, provinces need to enforce limits on surface disturbance within caribou ranges,” said Alberta Wilderness Association conservation specialist Carolyn Campbell. “They also need to follow important protected-areas promises with actions.”

“Protecting caribou is synonymous with a healthy Boreal forest. We have the knowledge and capacity to be good stewards - we can protect our wildlife and have sustainable forest industries, too,” said Greenpeace forest campaigner, Olivier Kolmel. “The government must act now, because soon it will simply be too late.”

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