

Updates

Alberta Caribou Need More than a 'Plan to Plan'

Alberta's woodland caribou urgently need habitat protection. Despite promises from successive Alberta governments to achieve self-sustaining caribou, human-caused habitat loss continues to rise in almost every Alberta caribou home range, pushing them nearer to extinction.

In October 2017, Alberta missed a five-year federal deadline to produce range plans that describe how caribou ranges will be managed to reach a minimum of 65 percent undisturbed habitat. On December 19, the Alberta government released a draft provincial caribou plan. In AWA's view, it is basically a "plan to plan." It outlines current problems – habitat disturbance and population trends by range – and it states some industry-specific strategies. However, it once again avoids committing to maintain current intact habitat and to steadily restore fragmented habitat; it gives no timelines or maps showing how or when the minimum habitat requirements will ever be reached.

Saving caribou from extirpation in Alberta matters, and we need plans that say so, and do it. Caribou are a sentinel species for older, relatively intact boreal and foothills forests and wetlands – landscapes that store significant water and carbon and which many other wildlife species rely upon. Aligning other Government of Alberta plans and regulations with effective caribou range plans would be a major advance to give real meaning to Alberta's longstanding commitment to maintain biodiversity and manage our forests sustainably.

In keeping with boreal scientists' recommendations, AWA strongly supports establishing permanent protected areas in a portion of each range. Clear surface disturbance limits and a good process for phasing in optimal access and infrastructure networks are also urgently needed. These steps are vital to reaching the goal of at



AWA's Carolyn Campbell, moderator Peter Lee and colleagues Kecia Kerr (CPAWS Northern Alberta) and Nikki Way (Pembina Institute) at a February 2018 caribou press conference. PHOTO: © N. PINK

least 65 percent undisturbed habitat. This goal isn't going to be reached overnight, because fragmented forests need to regrow, but the plan as drafted is much too vague about when the habitat target might ever be reached: it should include maps and a timeline committing to get the job done in 50 to 70 years.

Forestry and energy activity that respects caribou habitat requirements is also part of AWA's vision for caribou range management. Saving caribou isn't about jobs vs. caribou, it's about re-shaping how we manage our forests so there's room for wildlife that Albertans value. A regional timber supply sharing approach to support mills and jobs, extensive restoration work, energy activity in clustered development corridors, and eco-tourism all will help move Alberta toward healthy forests and healthy wildlife.

Decision makers need to know Albertans value caribou. Caribou4ever.ca is a great

website to learn about caribou, industry impacts, and what you can do to help. You can download a brochure to send to others who care about wildlife, and there is an easy template for writing the Premier about why saving caribou and their habitat matters to you.

In recent weeks, AWA's caribou activities have included an Edmonton press conference, radio interviews, speaking to Calgary-area students, and attending government public open houses on caribou plans. AWA is also an Alberta Environmental Network delegate for several Alberta government-hosted multi-sector meetings that are expected to wrap up in March; we will be putting forward habitat solutions for caribou that are not business-as-usual, but fair to communities.

- Carolyn Campbell