

Caribou Restoration Economy, Flags, and Nets

In May, I was pleased to represent AWA in a caribou range plan panel discussion hosted by the Canadian Heavy Oil Association. It was encouraging to hear company representatives outline technical advances, funding ideas, and caribou habitat gains to be made by restoring historic surface disturbances no longer required for their working leases.

AWA believes a thriving restoration economy is possible while respecting caribou habitat needs. For example, jobs will be generated from energy activity in clustered development corridors, extensive seismic line and pipeline corridor restoration, abandoned well reclamation, and eco-tourism. We have engaged some expert economic consultants to investigate how optimized range plans for the Bistcho and Yates ranges in northwest Alberta could support both caribou recovery and industry.

AWA's caribou flag project engages artists of all ages this summer to design flags to raise awareness of caribou. The Caribou4ever.ca website has all the details, plus caribou Q&A myth-busters and a quick letter template so you can let the Premier know why saving caribou and their habitat is important to you. Your voice is really needed now: this is a decisive time for our caribou.

Meanwhile, the most significant recent government steps are that the Minister of

Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) recently moved closer to applying her powers and obligations under the Species at Risk Act to prevent caribou extinction. This isn't just federal pushiness: back in the early 1990s, Alberta and the other provinces committed to maintain their biodiversity and recover their species at risk. For a generation now, they have failed to follow through.

On April 30, ECCC issued a progress report on unprotected critical habitat for Canada's boreal woodland caribou. The report found that the laws of Alberta, and other provinces, did not protect caribou habitat. This is perfectly obvious to anyone observing expanding industrial disturbance in Alberta caribou ranges. However, it's the very first time the Canadian government has issued such a report for any at-risk wildlife under the 2002 Species at Risk Act (SARA). The Minister also pledged to take another positive step – to issue these reports for other species at risk.

By reporting unprotected caribou critical habitat, the Minister is obliged under SARA to recommend to cabinet that a safety net order should be issued to protect that habitat. This report serves notice to the provinces that a countdown clock is ticking.

Then in early May, ECCC announced that Minister McKenna had determined there was an imminent threat to the recovery of southern mountain woodland caribou, including the Narraway, Redrock-Prai-

rie Creek and Jasper populations of west central Alberta. Unless Alberta and B.C. finalize range plans that enforce habitat protection, this language indicates the Minister soon will be obliged under SARA to recommend to the federal cabinet that an emergency protection order be issued to protect habitat.

What would a caribou habitat protection order mean? In AWA's view, it should be applied as an interim measure in one or several Alberta caribou ranges. It could apply only to new habitat destruction so, for example, energy companies would remain operating on their current footprint. It could apply for several weeks or months, just until enforceable range plans are finished in the affected range(s), which Alberta has already had over five years to do. The order could cease as soon as the range plan is in effect. The plan would outline how forestry, energy, and other activities will be managed for the next 100 years. This is to ensure enough good habitat is maintained, and that at least 65 percent undisturbed habitat is restored, so caribou can survive and recover. Achieving self-sustaining caribou populations has been an Alberta policy commitment, without action, since 2011. An interim habitat protection order would spur Alberta to apply the solutions for industry, communities, forests, and caribou that are within reach.

- Carolyn Campbell