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Alberta Forests Deserve More than the *Forests Amendment Act*

Last week, without any public consultation, the Alberta government proposed changes to the *Forests Act*. The amendments include a preamble that mentions forest ecological values and climate change, followed by revisions to facilitate forest commercial interests. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) believes the proposed *Forests Act* changes miss the opportunity for needed reforms to support forest ecosystems and transparent, inclusive forest management.

“We looked in vain for changes to the binding provisions of the *Forests Act* that support forest ecosystems and that modernize public participation,” said Carolyn Campbell, AWA conservation specialist. “We’re unconvinced by the grafting of slender preamble paragraphs onto what remains an outdated timber-supply-centred law and management system.”

In the Forestry Minister’s October 22nd statement for the Bill’s First Reading, there was no word on conservation of forest soils, carbon, waters, and wildlife, nor of strengthening public involvement in decisions affecting public forests. Instead Minister Dreeshen emphasized “more flexibility for foresters on when they can harvest and ensuring fibre security for our foresters and to becoming a top jurisdiction for forest companies to do business.” In AWA’s view, the *Forests Act* amendments mainly make it easier to issue timber quotas of longer terms.

Since citizens weren’t consulted on *Forests Act* changes, AWA asks the Alberta government to ensure there is meaningful public and Indigenous consultation on upcoming Forest Management Agreement (FMA) regulations. The *Forests Act* amendments specify that regulations will spell out standard clauses and matters that must be addressed in important 20-year long FMAs. These FMAs cover most of Alberta’s public forests.

Two recent examples of unsustainable forest management decisions are Alberta’s additional logging allocations announced October 8th in threatened caribou critical habitat and barred owl habitat:

- 1) more conifers will be logged in West Side of Athabasca River (WSAR) caribou range, in Forest Management Unit (FMU) S22 – see Map 1 below. WSAR caribou critical habitat was only 16% undisturbed in 2017, far less than the minimum 65% undisturbed habitat condition needed for self-sustaining caribou. This is despite Alberta’s acknowledgement in last week’s caribou conservation Agreement with the Canadian government that “Conserving, recovering, and maintaining critical habitat, as identified in the Recovery Strategies, in all of Alberta’s woodland caribou local population ranges, is the **immediate priority**.” [emphasis added]
- 2) more old deciduous mixedwood forests will be harvested in west central Alberta FMU G16, in barred owl habitat, an Alberta species of special concern (Map 2). Alberta’s non-binding *Barred Owl Conservation Management Plan 2016-2021* states: “loss and degradation of mature forest habitat presents the highest concern for barred owl populations in Alberta.”





AWA supports increased Indigenous participation and benefits in Alberta forest management. Instead of new allocations in over-allocated forests, AWA asks Alberta to promote meaningful Indigenous partnerships involving more sustainable harvest allocations and practices, ecological stewardship, and through increased habitat restoration programs.

AWA believes that Alberta's forest exploitation outpaces evidence-based ecological stewardship. "Alberta's very low structure retention rates within clearcut stands, its shrinking areas of intact older forests, and declines in woodland caribou, old-forest birds and native fish in our forests show we're failing forest ecosystems," said Carolyn Campbell. "Since the binding provisions of the revised *Forests Act* don't strengthen forest ecosystems, at least the upcoming FMA regulations should, and they should also require transparency and public and Indigenous participation in public forest management."

AWA encourages all those who are concerned to write Alberta's Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Hon. Devin Dreeshen (af.minister@gov.ab.ca) and the Minister of Alberta Environment and Parks, Hon. Jason Nixon (AEP.Minister@gov.ab.ca), copying AWA's ccampbell@abwild.ca, and request that Alberta:

- Consult with citizens and Indigenous communities on ecological and participation reforms needed for upcoming Forest Management Agreement regulations under the *Forests Act*;
- Not allocate new logging quotas in threatened caribou habitat (FMU S22) and at-risk barred owl habitat (FMU G16); and
- Build meaningful Indigenous forest management partnerships involving more sustainable harvest allocations and practices, ecological stewardship, and forest habitat restoration programs.

For more information:

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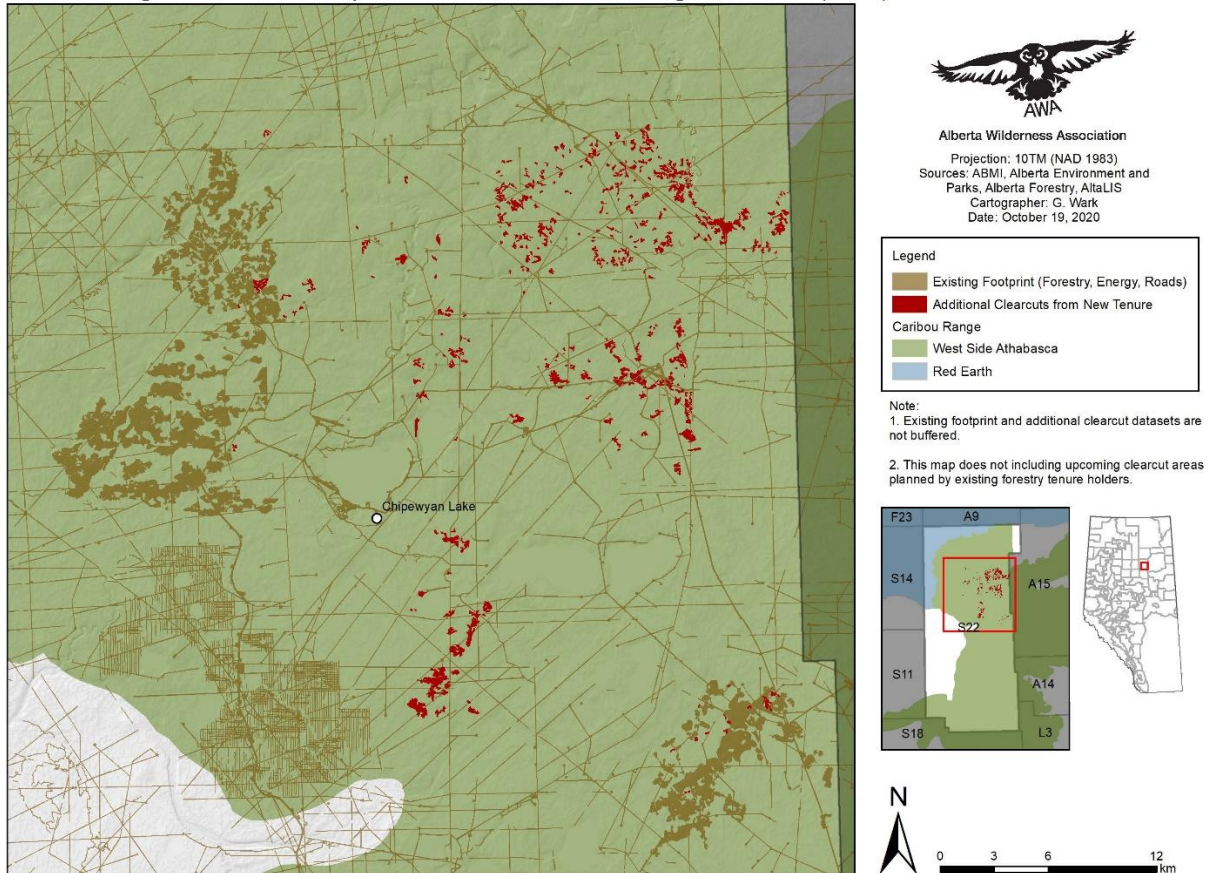
Attachments – Maps of New Logging Allocations announced October 8th in Threatened Caribou Range and Barred Owl Habitat





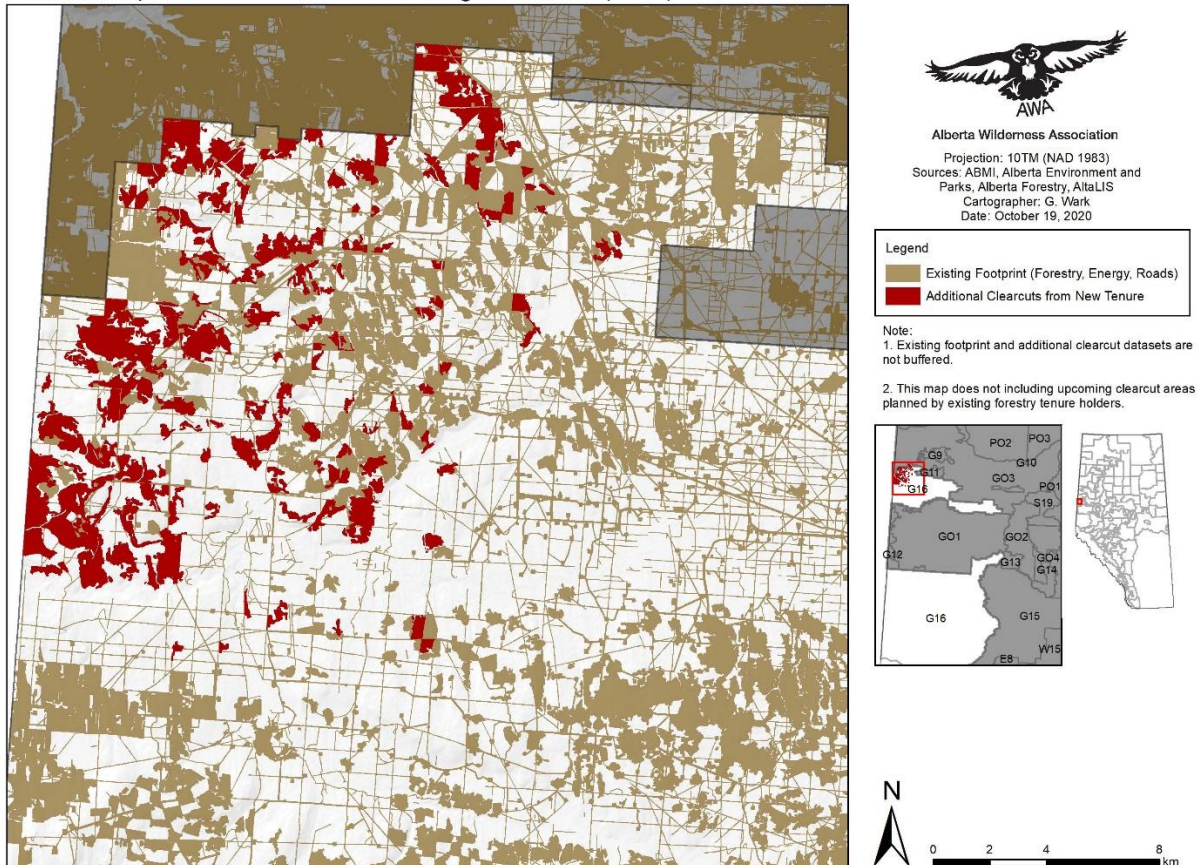
Attachments

Caribou range and human footprint in the S22 Forest Management Unit (FMU)





Human footprint in the G16 Forest Management Unit (FMU)



Map 2. New logging tenure allocation announced October 8th, 2020 in old-growth deciduous mixedwood forest habitat of barred owl, an Alberta species of special concern.

Map Source: Alberta Wilderness Association.

