

# Alberta Caribou Work Continues While B.C. Puts Agreements in Place

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**A**WA has been working hard in the past year to seek lasting agreements and on-the-ground actions to maintain and restore caribou habitat. Collaborative efforts are key to ensure Alberta's threatened woodland caribou populations survive and recover. They are needed to ensure communities in these regions can also thrive. We have participated in the Alberta government's multi-sector task forces launched in November 2019. These MLA-chaired task forces were appointed to provide recommendations for sub-regional land-use plans, in sub-regions overlapping with caribou ranges in northeast, northwest, and west central Alberta.

In December 2019, our legal case concerning protection for boreal caribou habitat in northeastern Alberta was adjourned, pending further discussions between the environmental groups and First Nations that brought the lawsuit and the federal government. Ecojustice, representing AWA, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, and David Suzuki Foundation, stated at the time:

*The environmental organizations and First Nations that Ecojustice represented on this issue are deeply concerned about the future of boreal caribou in Northeastern Alberta, where habitat destruction and fragmentation threatens their survival. As we work together to protect iconic boreal caribou and their critical habitat, Ecojustice's clients are encouraged by the opportunity for continued discussion with Minister Wilkinson. Out of respect for these ongoing discussions, Ecojustice and its clients have nothing further to say at this time.*

The fate of the draft Canada-Alberta caribou conservation agreement remains unknown. It was released for public comment in August 2019 and outlined a number of important timelines and commitments. In December 2019, the federal government and Cold Lake First Nations finalized a caribou conservation agreement. This is a positive step to enhance Cold Lake First Nations' capacity and leadership to recover woodland caribou within its traditional territory in northeast Alberta and northwest Saskatchewan. (The September 2019 *Wild Lands Advocate* reviewed each of these drafts).

In February 2020, two caribou agreements involving British Columbia and the federal government were finalized (those drafts were reviewed in the June 2019 *WLA*). One was a bilateral conservation agreement between the Canadian and B.C. government, covering all southern mountain caribou. We remain concerned that this agreement is still a 'plan to plan' with few specific commitments, and that habitat – and caribou survival prospects – will be allowed to steadily worsen from industrial activities.

Much more encouraging, although it is limited to only a few caribou ranges in northeast B.C., is the Intergovernmental Partnership Agreement. This is a four-party agreement between Sauteau First Nations, West Moberly First Nations, Canada and B.C. It covers the 'Central Group' of southern mountain caribou, including the Narraway range, which extends into Alberta southwest of Grande Prairie.

Highlights of the Partnership Agreement include the clarity of its Shared Recovery Objective: "immediately stabilizing and expeditiously growing the population of the Central

Group to levels that are self-sustaining and support traditional aboriginal harvesting activities, consistent with existing Aboriginal and Treaty rights." There is a shared commitment to establish management zones, including areas for 'sustainable resource activity' and areas emphasizing 'habitat protection, restoration and conservation'. There are specific dates for the milestones involved in implementing the Agreement. Compared to the draft agreement, there is more specific language confirming local governments' involvement in caribou recovery.

Although it is very regrettable that it is needed, it is appropriate that the finalized Partnership Agreement addresses a critical issue, in a new section called "Commitment to Action on Racism". This states, in part: "All Parties to this Agreement are concerned with the disrespectful and racist rhetoric that followed the introduction of the Partnership Agreement. The Parties agree to collaborate when planning and implementing future engagement processes related to the implementation of this Agreement to ensure such processes will be inclusive, respectful and anti-racist."

Visionary, effective, and enforceable caribou range plans are urgently needed in Alberta, for caribou survival and for the many forest species that will also benefit if our caribou have a future. To help make this happen, it's never been more important for Albertans to make their views known to elected officials about the importance of transitioning to deliberate land-use management that conserves and restores the habitat caribou require, while ensuring sustainable regional livelihoods. ♣