

West Fraser's Proposed Moon Creek Logging – The Worst Place in Alberta to Clearcut?



Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Director

In late July 2021 AWA learned that West Fraser Hinton was proposing imminent clearcuts in a particularly inappropriate area of west central Alberta, near the town of Grande Cache. The proposed access roads, water crossings, and roughly 2,660 hectares of cutblocks that will extend for kilometres on both sides of Moon Creek, will:

- destroy critical habitat of Threatened mountain caribou;
- overlap and threaten critical habitat of Endangered Athabasca rainbow trout; and
- run right to the borders of the iconic Willmore Wilderness Area.

If Alberta practiced an environmentally sustainable approach to forestry management, any one of these elements would disqualify this plan.

Indigenous and Community Concerns

West Fraser told the trappers whose Fur Management Area overlaps Moon Creek that a new bridge across the Creek would be built starting mid-summer 2021, followed by logging operations starting in September. We greatly appreciate the stewardship of these trappers, who informed AWA and many other people and groups about these plans. AWA issued action alerts, several joint news releases, and discussed our concerns with Alberta and federal regulators. The Mountain Metis Nation Association, representing a local Indigenous community, has also publicly opposed the logging plan and is preparing a legal injunction request. These efforts

appear to have slowed the approval process. However, we believe these old forest stands remain at high risk.

Caribou and Wolf Impacts

The 'A La Peche' caribou population, whose range includes Moon Creek, is the 'mountain' type of woodland caribou. To survive, they need to migrate into secure winter range in their foothills forests. The winter range should be at least 65% undisturbed to sustain mountain caribou from intolerable predation. However, Alberta has not responsibly managed cumulative industrial impacts to these forests. As a result, the A La Peche caribou winter range was only 12% undisturbed as of 2017 and it's likely in worse shape now (updated disturbance measures aren't public). As well, these caribou need adequate amounts of forest that is at least 80 years old to meet their life cycle needs for food, shelter, and successful reproduction. The Moon Creek area has some of the oldest and most intact tree stands in the region, including trees over 100 years old.

An intense provincial government wolf cull, conducted every winter since 2005/06, has enabled A La Peche caribou to survive in this highly fragmented landscape. This dire measure can only be justified if Alberta makes land-use decisions that maintain and restore good habitat so the caribou population can become naturally self-sustaining as soon as possible.

Only six percent of West Fraser Hinton's total forestry tenure area overlaps with the ranges of A La Peche caribou and adjacent Little Smoky caribou. Ninety-nine

percent of Little Smoky critical habitat was disturbed as of 2017. West Fraser is not required to log Moon Creek and has many other alternative logging sites outside these caribou ranges. AWA believes it is simply unethical to authorize more West Fraser clearcuts in A La Peche or Little Smoky ranges until a caribou range plan that complies with the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) is in place.

Endangered Native Fish Impacts

The Athabasca rainbow trout (ART) is a distinct Alberta subpopulation of rainbow trout. They're found mainly in small, cold, headwater streams in the upper Athabasca watershed, including Moon Creek. They were listed as Endangered under SARA in 2019 and a federal recovery strategy was finalized in 2020.

Athabasca rainbow trout need sediment-free stream areas, cold water temperatures, and adequate unfrozen over-wintering areas. Forestry-related clearcuts, soil compaction and roads can increase peak water flows and sediment runoff into streams. These activities can also interrupt vital groundwater inflows that regulate stream temperature ranges year-round. The recovery strategy states:

- "road stream crossings typically contribute higher fine sediment loads to streams than all other land use activities combined"
- "temporary crossings (< 3-year lifespan) constructed during exploration or forest harvesting on small, intermittent and ephemeral headwa-

ter streams often cause the greatest number of problems because of their high density”

AWA has urged DFO to use rigorous field-based evidence to determine whether Moon Creek logging, in combination with past and foreseeable cumulative impacts to ART populations and habitat, is compatible with the survival and recovery objectives for this endangered species. Until DFO can provide this evidence to the public, AWA has asked DFO not to authorize West Fraser’s proposed harvesting and watercourse crossings.

Losing Options Berland Task Force and Sub-regional Plan

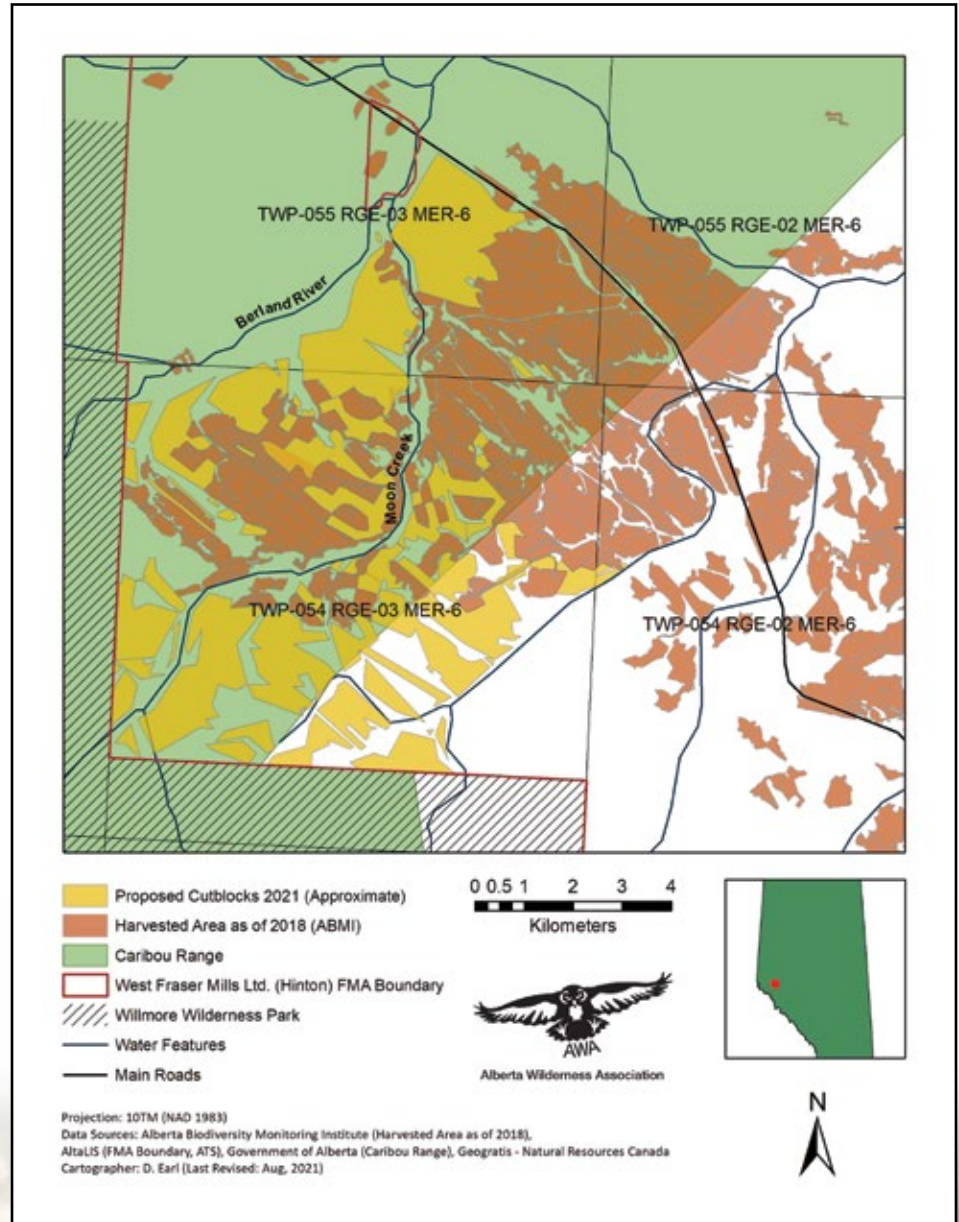
The Alberta government has initiated a task force of stakeholders and rights holders to advise on land use in the ‘Berland’ sub-region. Berland overlaps both A La Peche and Little Smoky caribou ranges. Alberta directed previous task forces to provide recommendations for caribou recovery and a working landscape, considering multi-species conservation, the exercise of Treaty rights and Indigenous traditional uses, and socio-economic opportunities and impacts.

Alberta has committed that its Berland sub-regional plan will uphold SARA requirements to manage caribou habitat over the next decades to achieve self-sustaining caribou populations. A SARA action plan for Athabasca rainbow trout is also on the horizon. AWA believes that, if West Fraser’s imminent clearcut proposals become reality, some of the high quality critical habitat these caribou and fish require will be degraded or disappear.

AWA has asked the Government of Alberta to require West Fraser not to clearcut in the six percent of its forest tenure that

overlaps caribou range. This will protect caribou survival options while deliberations continue to develop the Berland sub-regional plan, a plan that must comply with the federal *Species at Risk Act*. It will also protect these survival options for Athabasca rainbows while federal ac-

tion plans for this Endangered species are drafted. Please consider contacting decision makers to help stop these imminent cutblock plans. See AWA’s Little Smoky web page – Archive tab – for suggestions and contacts. 🐾



West Fraser Hinton’s proposed imminent cutblocks in the Moon Creek area extend along both sides of the Endangered Athabasca rainbow trout stream, right to the Willmore Wilderness Area boundary. Also, these cutblocks would remove intact old-growth forest habitat for Threatened A La Peche woodland caribou population. CREDIT: ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION.

