

Wilderness Watch

'Mind the Gap' - Alberta's First Caribou Range Plans Lack Near-Term Habitat Targets, Sideline Indigenous Priorities



Caribou habitat in Alberta's boreal forests and wetland ecosystems has been fragmented and degraded by extensive human access networks and industrial infrastructure, including seismic lines, cutblocks, well sites, roads, trails and pipelines. The combined impacts remove intact connected wetlands and older forest areas that caribou rely upon to minimise encounters with predators.

To avoid a habitat protection order under the federal *Species at Risk Act*, Alberta committed in October 2020 to produce plans providing effective protection for critical habitat in caribou ranges. This includes maintaining enough good habitat (called 'biophysical' habitat) for caribou survival, and attaining at least 65% undisturbed habitat conditions within each range in 50-100 years. To put that figure in perspective, undisturbed caribou habitat is currently only 6% in Bistcho range and 8% in Cold Lake range.

On April 8, the Alberta government released two long-awaited land-use plans for threatened woodland caribou. The plans apply to public lands in the Cold Lake sub-region in northeast Alberta, and the Bistcho Lake sub-region in northwest Alberta. They commit Alberta to track and reduce total land-use surface disturbances from human activities, using sector-specific measures and access management plans. This is a positive and necessary change, but it is nowhere near enough.



Only 6% of the Bistcho caribou range (outlined in black) is considered undisturbed caribou habitat. Alberta's Bistcho Lake and Cold Lake sub-regional plans released April 7, 2022 do not reveal by decade or area how they will achieve required caribou habitat objectives. Map source: Government of Alberta, 2021.

'Draft' plans that circulated for public comment in 2021 did predict and map overall caribou habitat metrics by decade. The 'final' 2022 plans now drop accountability for the overall results. AWA has learned the results have been modelled, but not yet released. Alberta must release these. There are also no forecasts provided for how the combined measures will likely affect overall caribou habitat conditions, for better or worse, in the first 5-10 years and later decades.

The new plans implement 'aggregated' forest harvesting. The Annual Allowable

Cut is maintained with less extensive disturbance, by creating fewer, larger cutblock areas, fewer logging roads that are reclaimed faster, and no return to those areas for 100 years. The fine print suggests salvage logging may occur in fire and beetle disturbed areas or for public safety or ecological concerns as viewed by the forestry minister. There is no transparency on how caribou biophysical habitat is affected by this approach.

Alberta's seismic line restoration program is clearer compared to the draft plans, with targets now set for the first 5, 10 and 20

years. However, in the first decade only 25% of legacy lines will be set on a trajectory towards restoration.

Road management is also weak. In Cold Lake, oil sands lease holders still decide when extensive networks of 'transitional' roads will be phased out, nullifying the benefits of limiting the density of the long-term 'primary' road network. In Bistcho, the future road network can even expand into currently intact areas.

Without transparent predictions of overall habitat conditions, there's no proof the pieces add up to effective protection of critical habitat; disturbance could actually worsen for decades. AWA is very concerned this habitat gap will continue to be filled by Alberta's over-reliance on intensive wolf culls that now occur in Cold Lake and half a dozen other Alberta caribou ranges.

AWA was a member of Bistcho Lake, Cold Lake and Upper Smoky task forces, and is a member of the current Wandering River and Berland task forces. AWA supports a collaborative process of stakeholders and rights holders. Consensus considerations from Bistcho Lake and Cold Lake task forces included exploring an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) in the Bistcho Lake area and identifying areas valuable to Indigenous people for proposed conservation areas in the Cold Lake sub-region.

However, the sub-regional plans lack meaningful commitments to Indigenous communities, which have identified cumulative land-use impacts in their traditional land infringing on their constitutional rights. "We found that we did not get what we needed and neither did the caribou, because the [Bistcho Lake] plan, at its heart, is a development plan," said Matt Munson, a technician with the Dene Tha' First Nation, in a media interview about the Nation's assessment of the Bistcho Lake plan.

Chief Janvier of Prairie Chipewyan First Nation, whose traditional territories overlap with the Cold Lake sub-region, assessed the Cold Lake plan in an Edmonton Journal column: "Unfortunately, it is vague, plans restoration on very long timescales, and has no meaningful role for Indigenous people — it codifies the status quo," he said. "If, as expected, Alberta uses this plan to lift the moratorium on mineral sales in

the region, the loss of caribou is all but guaranteed." These task force consensus recommendations should have been applied into credible plans for effectively protecting caribou habitat.

AWA recognises the important role of the federal government in the completion of these caribou plans, via the 2020 caribou conservation agreement between Alberta

and Ottawa that avoided a federal habitat protection order. AWA asks the federal ECCC Minister to promptly convey his opinion to Canadians about the extent to which Alberta is effectively protecting caribou critical habitat (or not) with these plans.

- Carolyn Campbell, Conservation Director
