

Alberta Forestry Decisions: A Roadblock to Caribou Recovery?



By Gillian Steward

Shane Ramstead received a letter in the mail in August 2021, he couldn't quite believe what he was reading. Alberta Forestry had approved a plan by West Fraser Timber to clear cut 3400 hectares in west central Alberta south of Grande Cache. Land that included the already depleted home range of the endangered A La Peche caribou herd.

"I was disappointed, shocked, dismayed...frustrated," said Ramstead, a retired Alberta Fish and Wildlife Officer.

Ramstead knew the government had established a caribou task force for the Berland sub-region — where the clear cutting would take place — to determine how best to preserve A La Peche and neighbouring Little Smoky caribou habitat so those two populations have a

better chance of surviving and hopefully thriving. But that task force had barely started its work at the time of this announcement from West Fraser.

"We knew that there was planning going on in some of these areas. But not to the extent that they were gonna actually go in pre-caribou plan and take all the remaining timber. So it was like they were just quickly trying to slide it



A La Peche caribou during autumn migration across Shane Ramstead and Darcy Handy's Berland area trapline. Photo © D. Handy.

in,” said Ramstead as he surveyed the vast forested hills in the area near Moon Creek, which has some of the oldest and most intact tree stands in the region, including trees over 100 years old.

West Fraser, a publicly traded company, is the largest softwood lumber producer in North America. Jim Pattison, the well-known billionaire from British Columbia, owns ten percent.

Ramstead and his trapping partner Darcy Handy, a retired dentist, immediately took action. They notified several environmental organizations (ENGOS) — The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) — as well as The Mountain Métis (a community in the area), other like-minded people, and the news media in order to bring the situation to public attention.

In the end Alberta Forestry backed down and ordered a delay until the caribou task forces established by Alberta Environment had completed their work and government had followed through with decisions about caribou habitat restoration.

Ramstead received that ominous letter because he has a trap line in the Berland region; trappers must be notified of industrial plans so they can access their trails and move their traps and other equipment out of harm’s way. But there is no such requirement for Alberta forestry or timber companies to consult widely with the general public in the area. Without Ramstead and Handy sounding the alarm, the first stage of the logging project might have been completed over the winter of 2021-22.

“It really, really points out that they can make a decision like that without really publicly consulting the people in the area ... that doesn’t seem right,” said Ramstead who was named North American Wildlife Officer of the year in 2017 by the North American Wildlife Enforcement Officers Association.

Lack of Transparency

Brenda Heelan-Powell of the Edmonton-based Environmental Law Centre also has some concerns with the lack of consultation and transparency

required of forestry companies by the *Alberta Forests Act*, an issue which dates back to the early 1970s.

Consultation should begin, she said over a coffee in Calgary, with the Forest Management Agreements (FMAs) by which the provincial government gives timber companies the rights to a swath of land and the trees on it for a period of 20 years.

“Consultation should happen before the government grants rights to a third party,” she said. “There should be some discussion as to whether it’s appropriate so concerns can be dealt with right off the bat. If you are granting an FMA and you have public consultation around it, it might become apparent very quickly that this area over here includes caribou range, so let’s not grant the FMA.”

Forest Management Planning guidelines stipulate that timber companies should undertake consultation but there are no specifics about how that consultation should be carried out, Heelan-Powell said. Some companies hold open houses to explain their plans but that process only reaches the people who are able to attend.

The March 2022 Forest Management Agreement Decision Policy is somewhat clearer when it comes to Indigenous communities: FMA holders “may defer” harvesting in areas that are of cultural significance to Indigenous communities and “agree to engage in enhanced consultation with Indigenous communities with an objective of better understanding and protecting areas that are important for the exercise of the rights of Indigenous peoples.”

In the past three decades those rights have been spelled out in court decisions across the country which compel consultation, accommodation or compensation for Indigenous communities impacted by industrial development. But the *Alberta Forests Act* doesn’t compel consultation or accommodation for Indigenous communities or any other affected party even though the FMAs turn over rights to huge swaths of land for 20 years or more if they are renewed, which is usually the case.

After the FMA is approved there are other steps along the way — a forest management plan that sets Annual Allowable Cut, a spatial harvesting sequence plan that covers a ten-year period, a five-year rolling General Development Plan, and a compartment-specific Forest Harvest Plan which extends for one to five years.

That was the stage when Shane Ramstead received the letter informing him of West Fraser’s plans to clear cut old growth forest on land that included caribou range. It was the first time he had heard of such detailed plans. But he wasn’t being asked for his opinion; he was being told it was a done deal.

Ramstead had concerns about caribou. Indigenous people in the area worry about how harvesting plans may affect their water sources. Landon Delorme of the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation points to an area on Mount Louis and wonders about safeguards for lands that sustain their nearby rivers and lakes.

According to a CPAWS report, West Fraser’s plans meant the last undisturbed pieces of the A La Peche caribou winter range that was already 88 percent disturbed by human activity would be clear cut, destroying old growth forest that caribou depend on for protection and food. Recent estimates put the Little Smoky population at 110; the A La Peche population is at least 100.

Communications officials at West Fraser were contacted twice by email and asked about their consultation practices particularly as they applied to the Moon Creek plan. They did not respond.

Heelan-Powell said that recent regulatory changes note that caribou range plans may require companies to alter their original plans for timber harvesting. Since no caribou range plan has been completed for the Berland region, getting into the area early means fewer restrictions.

There is another complication: the caribou task forces were established by Alberta Environment and Parks (now Environment and Protected Areas), but decisions about timber harvesting are made in a separate ministry — Alberta Forestry, Parks and Tourism.



A La Peche caribou during autumn migration across Shane Ramstead and Darcy Handy's Berland area trapline. Photo © D. Handy.

Alberta Forestry is primarily focused on generating revenue from timber operations; Alberta Environment is responsible for protecting wilderness and wildlife habitat. How the ministries exercise those conflicting mandates often depends on which ministry has more influence in Cabinet.

Challenges by Timber Companies

Caribou task forces for west central Alberta were established by the provincial government after it entered into an agreement with the federal government to preserve caribou habitat or be faced with a federal habitat protection order. The task forces are made up of representatives of Indigenous rights holders and various stakeholders such as forestry and petroleum companies, municipalities, ENGOs, tourism operators, and trappers who are tasked with developing recommendations for a sub-regional land-use plan.

The Upper Smoky Task Force focused on a sub-region adjacent to Berland and forwarded recommendations to Alberta Environment in 2020. The government promised an enforceable Upper Smoky land-use plan by the end of 2022, but the recommendations have not yet been made public because they are still under discussion. The Berland Task Force has yet to forward its set of recommendations.

These delays have given forestry companies a certain amount of leeway when it comes to harvesting plans that might

include caribou range. And given the lack of consultation and transparency about those plans, caribou range could easily be clear cut before concerned stakeholders or the general public can raise objections.

For example, in spring 2020 during the months prior to the agreement between Alberta and the federal government, Alberta Forestry approved the 10-year Forest Management Plan proposed by forestry giant Weyerhaeuser which allowed the company to harvest 550,000 cubic metres of coniferous forests on Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou ranges each year — almost half of the annual allowable cut for Weyerhaeuser Grande Prairie.

Weyerhaeuser held an open-house just outside Grande Prairie during which it presented its plan and took questions from those in attendance. But there was no requirement for the company to accommodate concerns of those who attended or for further consultation.

A month after the Weyerhaeuser plan was approved the Alberta Forest Products Association presented Devin Dreeshen, the cabinet minister responsible for forestry, with a report that recommended opening up parks and protected areas in order to increase the forest land base available for harvest. A week later, on May 4, Dreeshen announced that the forestry industry's annual allowable cut would increase by up to 13 percent. The AFPA report was not publicly available and there were no public consultations beforehand, simply a media release announcing the minister's decision.

In 2019 Alberta Newsprint Company (ANC), a joint venture of West Fraser Newsprint Ltd and Whitecourt Newsprint Company that was created to develop and operate a newspaper mill in Whitecourt, went to court after it was ordered by the Minister of Forestry and Agriculture to harvest less timber on caribou range than had been agreed to in an earlier Forest Management Agreement. ANC Timber claimed the order was invalid because it breached the contract. The court sided with the government and refused the request to delay the order.

Forestry Employment

In 2013, Whitecourt, a town of about 10,000 people 160 kilometres northwest of Edmonton was named The Forestry Capital of Canada for that year by the Canadian Institute of Forestry, an industry lobby group. It's easy to see why. Whitecourt is home to two lumber mills, a pulp mill, and a pulp and paper business. The lumber mills are operated by West Fraser and Canfor; the pulp mill is owned by Canfor; ANC owns the pulp and paper operation.

Other towns in west central Alberta — Hinton, Edson, Rocky Mountain House — are also home to forestry operations. Grande Cache relies on the local Foothills Forest Products sawmill owned by Dunkley Lumber for some employment, as well as coal mines and oil and gas infrastructure. According to government documents, about 18,000 people are directly employed by Alberta's forestry industry. The provincial treasury garners about \$100 million a year in timber royalties. The industry contributes \$2.9 billion annually to Alberta's GDP.

According to a 2016 mediator's report on the dilemma presented by caribou habitat restoration and the interests of forestry industry, companies operating in west central Alberta are highly interdependent; exchanging wood fibre in various forms to enable efficient operation of sawmills and pulp mills, and other facilities including biomass power generation and composite wood products. These companies are all greatly dependent on wood allocations under various forms of tenure that originate in and around the Little Smoky and A La Peche caribou ranges. The mediator recommended that all significant harvesting



Caribou Country Contradictions – Clearcuts were temporarily averted on some of the forested slopes within threatened caribou home ranges that are visible behind the Highway 40 caribou patrol traffic cautions. Photo © Alberta Wilderness Association.

by Canfor and West Fraser in west central Alberta be conducted outside caribou ranges for the next five years (until 2021), but that recommendation was not implemented by Alberta Forestry.

Looking to the Future

When it comes to caribou, the mandates from Alberta Environment and Alberta Forestry seem to be completely at odds. Under the auspices of Alberta Environment, wildlife officers organize an annual cull of wolves by shooting them from helicopters because they have become such a threat to caribou. But over in Alberta Forestry timber companies are given permission to clear cut on caribou ranges even though that makes it easier for wolves to prey on caribou.

Brenda Heelan Powell of the Environmental Law Centre said that while the term “sustainable forestry” gets used a

lot by timber companies, government, and some ENGOs it would be more accurate to call Alberta’s approach to forestry “sustainable timber.”

“When I look at the legislation, the regulations, the bulk of the guidelines, to me it is about sustainable timber. We don’t want to cut down so many trees that none are left. There’s a big focus on reforestation and making sure when we cut here today, we replant so there will be more timber supply in the future,” said Heelan-Powell.

It is time to modernize our legislation, she added, and move from regulation of the forestry industry designed to ensure a sustainable supply of timber to ecosystem-based management of our forests. That would allow forests to be managed for a multitude of values rather than just timber. It could also mean more community involvement, monitoring and transparency.

In the meantime, caribou habitat is rapidly disappearing, and the caribou population is dwindling. Local residents like Shane Ramstead, the trapper and former fish and wildlife officer, are pleased that their publicity campaign put a stop to plans to harvest on caribou range. But they also know the fight is not over.

“If we had not done anything, if we had not pursued it, we had not contacted other people nothing would’ve been done. No one would’ve known the difference. All that would’ve been logged over, halfway done already, and no one would’ve been the wiser,” said Ramstead.

As Ramstead well knows from his years of work on the land, Alberta’s forests are important for all sorts of reasons, not just timber revenue. For caribou they are essential to their survival. 🐾