



Species at Risk: Albertans Working Together to Strike a Balance

Issue

Woodland caribou are a threatened species in Canada. By October 2017, each province and territory are required to meet federal government requirements to develop caribou range plans that restore and protect, over time, 65 percent of their habitat. In Alberta, this is a dramatic increase in habitat protection, and will have a significant impact on Alberta industries that operate in the ranges, the communities they support and the province's economy. Currently, range plans are evaluated based on ecological or environmental criteria, and do not provide for a socio-economic impact analysis prior to submission to the federal government.

Background

Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou

In 2003, Woodland caribou were federally listed as a threatened species in the Species at Risk Act (SARA). Under the federal "Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou," all provinces are required to produce range plans that outline how 65 percent of boreal woodland caribou habitat will be restored to undisturbed habitat and maintained undisturbed over time, and how the land and activities within the range will be managed for habitat protection. These provincial range plans are due by October 2017.¹ The range plans are to support a working landscape where species at risk and industrial activity co-exist.²

In May 2016, the Alberta Government accepted recommendations from a report developed by an external consultant, "Setting Alberta on the Path to Caribou Recovery," which states that 1.8 million hectares of land be designated as permanent protection areas for caribou recovery in northwestern Alberta.³ The Province used these recommendations as a basis to complete the first draft range plan for the Little Smoky and A La Pêche ranges in northwestern Alberta. This plan is currently under revision.

Forestry allocations, by way of land and volume based tenures (Forest Management Agreements ("FMAs"), quotas and permits), and oil and gas allocations, by way of petroleum and natural gas ("PNG") leases or oil sands leases, are present in every boreal woodland caribou range. As the range plans are being developed, it is clear that there is potential for sustainable timber supply in the region to be significantly impacted. The combination of additional species at risk plans, as well as a new structure retention directive and other government policies all have the potential to decrease wood supply, increase costs and result in lost mill production or even closures. The carbon tax, with an estimated cost of \$27 million/year to the forest industry⁴, places an additional burden on the sector. With caribou herds located where the highest value of

¹ Environment Canada, Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer Tarandus Caribou*), Boreal Population, in Canada, Update, 2012, doi:10.2307/3796292

² <https://auma.ca/advocacy-services/resolutions/resolutions-index/species-risk-and-need-overall-socio-economic-impact-assessment>

³ <http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/wildlife-management/caribou-management/caribou-action-range-planning/documents/OnThePathtoCaribouRecovery-May-2016.pdf>

⁴ <http://albertaforestproducts.ca/>

Alberta's oil and gas resources are situated, including the Montney Formation – one of the top natural gas basins in the world – the energy industry faces the potential of significant restrictions on development.

Range plans developed under the current federal process are evaluated based on ecological or environmental criteria, as the process does not allow for a socio-economic analysis to be conducted concurrent to plan development; rather, this analysis occurs after plan submission to the federal government. As such, range plans submitted to the federal government are missing key social and economic considerations about impacts to industry, local municipal governments and to Alberta communities and families – considerations that, if known earlier, could lead to different, more balanced solutions.

In addition, the current process takes a one-species approach. A multi-species approach, the strategy being taken in Southern Saskatchewan, recognizes that these species do not exist in isolation of one another and, as such, makes for a more practical and efficient path for planning.⁵

Striking a Balance

Alberta is recognized as a global leader in forest stewardship and management. The industry is committed to the protection of the environment and wildlife species, and has already invested millions of dollars into research and measures around the protection of caribou.

Approximately 58 percent of the province is forested, helping to not only maintain a healthy environment, clean water, diverse wildlife habitat and a backdrop for tourism, but also to support the continuity and further development of forestry, one of the cornerstones of Alberta's economy.⁶ The forest industry employs 15,000 Albertans directly and creates an additional 30,000 jobs, contributing over \$4 billion to the province's economy.

A pillar of Canada's and Alberta's economies, Alberta's oil and gas sector accounts for about 19% of the province's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2015, Alberta produced about 80% of Canada's crude oil and 68% of its natural gas, with much of the development and activity situated in caribou ranges.

These industries are a vital source of jobs for Albertans and economic activity in our communities and in the province. The Alberta Chambers is confident that, by adopting a collaborative approach that draws from the expertise of a range of stakeholders across the province, Alberta will be able to strike a balance between the protection of critical (extirpated, endangered, and threatened) species, and the viability and sustainability of Alberta industry, jobs and communities.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce Recommends the Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada work together to:

1. Complete a socio-economic impact assessment prior to listing the species and in conjunction with a scientific assessment being conducted.
2. Consider a multi-species approach to planning.
3. Ensure stakeholder interests are understood and considered, and inform the development of the plan and its implementation. Stakeholders include all those impacted, including, but not limited to: industry, ENGO's, First Nations and Metis, municipal governments and community-based organizations.

⁵ http://www.sodcap.com/Docs/EnvironmentCanada_MarkWayland_2016.pdf

⁶ <https://www.albertacanada.com/AlbertaForestSector-2012EconomicImpact.pdf>