



Alberta Wilderness Association
"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

Delivered by email to: EPA.SRPRegDetailsRP@gov.ab.ca

June 24, 2025

AWA Feedback Re: Draft Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan

Dear Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan Engagement Team,

The Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is writing to provide feedback on the draft Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan (US-SRP) as part of the public engagement process initiated by the Ministry of Environment and Protected Areas on March 27, 2025.

AWA, founded in 1965, is an Alberta-based conservation organization with over 10,000 members and supporters across Alberta and around the world. AWA works towards the completion of a protected areas network and good stewardship of Alberta's public lands, waters and biodiversity to ensure future generations enjoy the abundant benefits they provide. AWA has long advocated for caribou conservation and has actively participated in the sub-regional land use planning process since 2019, including through representation on the Upper Smoky Task Force.

AWA is seriously concerned by several elements of the draft US-SRP. One of our biggest concerns is the devastating impact the US-SRP will have on the recovery and long-term survival of the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou populations. Rather than tackling the well-documented and ongoing cumulative effects in this region, the plan falls short of making meaningful progress toward caribou recovery and landscape-level conservation.

The development of this sub-regional plan, a key commitment in the Section 11 Agreement of the Species at Risk Act (SARA) between Alberta and Canada, intended to support woodland caribou conservation and recovery. Instead, the US-SRP proposes a so-called "balanced approach" that heavily favours industrial development while offering no credible strategy to achieve caribou recovery. Despite decades of caribou population declines caused by habitat loss and fragmentation, the US-SRP prioritizes industrial interests and sets no meaningful limits to protect what little undisturbed critical habitat remains. This fails to meet even the basic ecological conditions for recovery outlined in the federal Recovery Strategy, which identifies 65 percent undisturbed habitat as the minimum threshold needed to support self-sustaining populations. Perhaps recognizing its own shortcomings, supporting caribou conservation is notably absent as a US-SRP outcome.

The US-SRP offers no viable path toward the recovery of the Redrock-Prairie Creek and the Narraway caribou populations. The level of industrial activity proposed, especially the extensive timber harvesting permitted within known caribou winter ranges, will almost certainly lead to further declines and eventual extirpation of these populations from Alberta's public lands.

AWA appreciates having the opportunity to review the draft US-SRP and to provide feedback and recommendations as part of this public engagement process. Our specific requests are summarized below, followed by our detailed feedback.

For the reasons stated above and detailed later in this letter, AWA respectfully requests:

- That the Government of Alberta reject the draft Plan in its current form and undertake a substantial revision of the Plan, developed in meaningful collaboration with stakeholders, including environmental organizations and Indigenous communities.
- That the revised US-SRP explicitly identify caribou conservation and recovery as a core outcome.
- That the US-SRP policy objectives include caribou population recovery to self-sustaining, and include measurable targets aligned with the critical habitat requirements of the federal Recovery Strategy and Alberta's own Woodland Caribou Policy.
- That the Government of Alberta adopt a precautionary approach on industrial activities in the Upper Smoky region, particularly forestry in the slow-go zone, while the geographic location of critical habitat is identified and mapped.
- That the Government of Alberta identify the geographic location of critical habitat in Alberta for all the Southern Mountain Caribou herds, particularly for the Narraway and Redrock-Prairie Creek populations, in accordance with the federal Recovery Strategy under SARA.

Thank you for considering these comments and recommendations. We hope to see our concerns addressed as this engagement process proceeds.

Sincerely,

ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION



Pamela Narváez-Torres
Conservation Specialist



David Fernández, Ph.D.
Conservation Specialist

cc: Danielle Smith, Premier of Alberta, Premier@gov.ab.ca

Rebecca Schulz, Minister, Environment and Protected Areas, epa.minister@gov.ab.ca

Todd Loewen, Minister, Forestry and Parks, fp.Minister@gov.ab.ca

Stephanie Clarke, Deputy Minister, Environment and Protected Areas, Stephanie.Clarke@gov.ab.ca

Andrew Horton, Assistant Deputy Minister, Lands Division, Environment and Protected Areas, Andrew.Horton@gov.ab.ca

Julie Dabrusin, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada, julie.dabrusin@parl.gc.ca

Patrick Forest, Director, Priority Species, Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment and Climate Change Canada, patrick.forest@ec.gc.ca

Vanessa Charlwood, Regional Director, Prairie and Northern Region, Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment and Climate Change Canada, Vanessa.Charlwood@ec.gc.ca

Blair Hammond, Director, Pacific Region, Canadian Wildlife Service, blair.hammond@ec.gc.ca

AWA's Feedback and Recommendations

Lack of a "Balanced Approach"

The US-SRP refers to taking a "balanced" approach to land-use planning within a "working landscape". However, these terms are not defined in measurable or ecological terms and appear to function more as buzzwords than meaningful policy guidance. The plan emphasizes continued industrial development, explicitly stating its role in enabling the Government of Alberta's goal to double oil and gas production¹, while failing to outline how such development will be balanced with the recovery needs of threatened southern mountain caribou populations.

Industrial development has taken place in the region for decades, and the result has been ongoing habitat loss and severe population declines for the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou populations². There has been no demonstrated historical or current balance between development and conservation outcomes in this area. Framing this draft plan as balanced misrepresents the on-the-ground reality, where industry interests clearly dominate.

AWA requests that, for this plan to represent a truly balanced approach, it must commit to meeting the habitat requirements of southern mountain caribou, including a significant increase in undisturbed critical habitat and biophysical habitat, particularly within winter ranges. Specifically, this means reaching 65% undisturbed critical habitat for both the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway populations, as identified in the federal Recovery Strategy. As it stands, these populations are set up to lose under this "balanced" framework. There can be no genuine balance when a species at risk continues to face habitat loss and has no viable path to recovery.

At present, the US-SRP is heavily skewed towards enabling continued industrial expansion, with insufficient safeguards to support biodiversity or caribou recovery. The US-SRP must prioritize caribou recovery, following provincial-national agreements, and establish specific, enforceable outcomes that protect and recover species at risk.

Forest Harvesting and Impacts on Caribou Recovery

The US-SRP includes a Harvest Timing Sequence that would allow extensive clear-cutting across most of the Redrock-Prairie Creek winter range over the next 95 years, as well as significant portions of the Narraway winter range. **If approved as is, the plan would result in the dramatic, multi-decade destruction of biophysical critical habitat in both caribou ranges.** This forest harvesting management

¹ Government of Alberta (2025). "Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan" at PDF page 6.

² Alberta Environment and Protected Areas. (2024). *Report on the implementation of the section 11 agreement for the conservation and recovery of the woodland caribou in Alberta: 2022-2023*. Online: <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/5c14fb5a-0a21-40ab-adaf-a5956fb749a9/resource/9de00939-7fa4-4623-aa49-a6dcda53332f/download/epa-report-implementation-s11-agreement-conservation-recovery-woodland-caribou-2022-2023.pdf>

strategy appears to be designed to maximize and accelerate anthropogenic footprint rather than to reduce it, particularly in what the plan designates as a “slow-go” zone. For a more detailed analysis of the implications discussed here, including maps and figures, please refer to the Joint ENGOs Report³ sent to you by email April 22, 2025.

The Government of Alberta’s own data, presented during the public webinars, projected that undisturbed critical habitat for the Narraway herd would decline from 14 percent to 13 percent in the coming 40 years, and for the Redrock-Prairie Creek herd from 27 percent to 17 percent⁴. These values are already well below the 65 percent undisturbed critical habitat threshold identified in the federal Recovery Strategy as necessary to support self-sustaining caribou populations.⁵ Government modelling further shows that while Redrock-Prairie Creek undisturbed critical habitat may reach 65 percent in 100 years, Narraway habitat is only projected to recover to 58 percent, falling short of the required threshold. However, we consider these projections to be highly optimistic, as they do not account for the expected increase in frequency and severity of wildfires, which are already affecting the region⁶ and are likely to continue impacting caribou habitat in the coming decades⁷.

The negative implications of this timber harvesting plan would occur rapidly. In the first 25 years, clear-cutting in the Redrock-Prairie Creek range would entirely overlap with current caribou occurrence and movement in their winter range. In the Narraway range, the overlap would impact the last remaining areas still used by this population in winter, leaving only a small, isolated section unharvested. Caribou would almost certainly avoid this area due to increased predation risk and habitat fragmentation⁸.

These early phases of timber harvesting would effectively eliminate the ability of the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway herds to persist in their winter ranges. The first three harvest periods would also destroy the last remaining large patches (>1,000 ha) of undisturbed biophysical critical habitat, with no credible prospect of meaningful recovery over the next 25 years. This would lead to these caribou populations increasingly spending more time or remaining in higher elevation summer ranges

³Implications of the Alberta Government Draft Upper Smoky Sub-regional Plan for Southern Mountain Caribou. Online: https://albertawilderness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Web-version_Implications-of-the-Alberta-Government-Draft-Upper-Smoky-Sub-Regional-Plan-for-Southern-Mountain-Caribou.pdf

⁴ Government of Alberta (2025). “Draft Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan Slide Deck” at PDF page 49.

⁵ Environment Canada, *Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou, Southern Mountain population (Rangifer tarandus caribou) in Canada* (2014), online: https://ecprccsarstact.z9.web.core.windows.net/files/SARAFiles/legacy/plans/rs_woodland%20caribou_bois_s_mtn_0614_e.pdf

⁶Lamb, C.T., Steenweg, R., Serrouya, R., Hervieux, D., McNay, R.S., Heard, D.C., McLellan, B.N., Shores, C., Palm, E., Giguere, L., Hubner, J., Polfus, J., Klaczek, M., Crosland, N., White, S., Russel, M. and Ford, A. (2025) The Erosion of Threatened Southern Mountain Caribou Migration. *Global Change Biology*, **31**, e70095. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.70095>.

⁷ Price, D.T., Alfaro, R.I., Brown, K.J., Flannigan, M.D., Fleming, R.A., Hogg, E.H., Girardin, M.P., Lakusta, T., Johnston, M., McKenney, D.W., Pedlar, J.H., Stratton, T., Sturrock, R.N., Thompson, I.D., Trofymow, J.A. and Venier, L.A. (2013) Anticipating the consequences of climate change for Canada’s boreal forest ecosystems1. *Environmental Reviews*, **21**, 322–365. <https://doi.org/10.1139/er-2013-0042>.

⁸Lamb, C.T., Steenweg, R., Serrouya, R., Hervieux, D., McNay, R.S., Heard, D.C., McLellan, B.N., Shores, C., Palm, E., Giguere, L., Hubner, J., Polfus, J., Klaczek, M., Crosland, N., White, S., Russel, M. and Ford, A. (2025) The Erosion of Threatened Southern Mountain Caribou Migration. *Global Change Biology*, **31**, e70095. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.70095>.

throughout the year. Mountainous areas are not suitable for overwintering caribou. They provide poor winter foraging conditions⁹, and expose caribou to high mortality risks, including from avalanches¹⁰.

Given the already severe loss of caribou habitat, AWA requests an immediate pause on timber harvesting within caribou ranges. If harvesting must occur, it should be strictly limited to areas that are already highly disturbed and located outside of identified caribou winter habitat. However, the most scientifically sound and responsible option is to leave the remaining old-growth forest intact and prioritize the regeneration of previously harvested areas. This approach is the only viable path toward supporting caribou recovery and avoiding further decline.

The recovery of southern mountain caribou is feasible. The Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway populations demonstrate the resiliency of stable population growth with continued wolf culling^{11,12}. However, continued wolf culling will not keep caribou safe from poor winter habitat conditions in the mountains, and it will not protect caribou from catastrophic mortality events due to avalanches.

To ensure alignment with federal and provincial commitments and to prioritize the survival of these threatened herds¹³, AWA also requests that caribou conservation and recovery be added as an explicit outcome under this forest management objective with clear and reasonable timelines that will prevent further caribou loss.

Coal Mining in the Upper Smoky Region

AWA is concerned that the draft US-SRP does not adequately address the environmental risks associated with coal development in the Upper Smoky region. Section 7¹⁴ should be amended to say: “Mining operations result in permanent landscape alterations and associated implications for adjacent natural resources, **watershed health, soil contamination, air pollution, and carbon emissions**”. These environmental costs must be transparently considered as part of any land-use decision.

AWA recommends adding watershed protection as a key outcome of the coal management objective, recognizing the cumulative impacts of mining activities on water quality and availability.

⁹ Thomas, D. C., Edmonds, E. J. , & Brown, W. K. (1996). The diet of woodland caribou populations in west-central Alberta. *Rangifer*, 16(4), 337–342. <https://doi.org/10.7557/2.16.4.1275>

¹⁰ Stockfish J. 2022. Two caribou killed eight days apart on Highway 40. *Jasper Fitzhugh*. [accessed 2025 Apr 14]. <https://www.fitzhugh.ca/news/two-caribou-killed-eight-days-apart-on-highway-40-8085995>

¹¹ Alberta Environment and Protected Areas. (2024). *Report on the implementation of the section 11 agreement for the conservation and recovery of the woodland caribou in Alberta: 2022-2023*. Online:

<https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/5c14fb5a-0a21-40ab-adaf-a5956fb749a9/resource/9de00939-7fa4-4623-aa49-a6dcda53332f/download/epa-report-implementation-s11-agreement-conservation-recovery-woodland-caribou-2022-2023.pdf>

¹² Environment Canada. (2018). Imminent threat assessment for southern mountain caribou. Species at Risk Public Registry. https://www.registrelep-sararegistry.gc.ca/virtual_sara/files/ImminentThreatAnalysisSmc-v00-2018Jun-Eng.pdf

¹³ Environment and Climate Change Canada and Alberta Environment and Parks (2020), “Agreement for the Conservation and Recovery of the Woodland Caribou In Alberta” https://www.sararegistry.gc.ca/virtual_sara/files/Ca-CaribouAlberta-v00-2020Oct-Eng.pdf.

¹⁴ Government of Alberta (2025). “Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan” at PDF page 27.

Under Objective 7.1, scientifically determined Instream Flow Needs should also be established to inform the Surface Water Quality Management Framework. Additionally, recommendations from the government’s Selenium Working Group should be incorporated.

AWA also has concerns about Policy Requirement 7.2.2. It is unclear why coal mining is not limited to underground operations in Zone 1, considering this zone overlaps with the Redrock-Prairie Creek winter habitat and the Smoky River and Sheep Creek watersheds. Given the sensitivity of the landscape, we request further explanation and recommend that coal development in Zone 1 also be limited to underground mining only.

Inadequate Provisions to Manage Anthropogenic Disturbance

The US-SRP establishes extremely lax requirements for managing access and approving anthropogenic activities, alongside unrealistic and poorly defined restoration targets. Additionally, the US-SRP will allow for the continued development of new disturbance features without defined limits. While AWA supports the inclusion of a maximum limit on the amount of primary road networks in the “slow-go” zone, we note that the maximum length of primary roads of 705 km has been included in the Supplemental Standards¹⁵, which are not binding and thus reduce enforceability. Furthermore, this limit does not seem to be based on ecological thresholds or aligned with caribou recovery goals.

AWA is concerned that the US-SRP would allow indefinite construction of new roads across the “slow-go” zone, even when that exceeds the suggested maximum of 705 km of primary roads, provided that a sufficient restoration footprint is established¹⁶. Given the long time periods between initiating restoration and achieving ecologically meaningful undisturbed critical habitat¹⁷, the US-SRP would facilitate the ongoing loss of undisturbed critical habitat for decades^{18,19}. During the Government of Alberta’s public virtual information sessions, government staff stated that it can take approximately 40 years for a restored area to resemble undisturbed habitat, and at least 80 years to support the biophysical habitat required for caribou²⁰. Thus, the US-SRP should prevent additional primary road construction beyond the maximum threshold until at least 40 years have passed since the associated restoration started, and limits on roads should apply to all zones within the subregion, not just in the “slow-go” zone.

In the case of oil and gas features, they leave a relatively smaller footprint compared to other operations such as clear-cutting. However, their cumulative ecological impacts, particularly through roads, seismic lines and well sites, remain significant. The US-SRP includes vague intentions to restore inactive and non-productive oil and gas infrastructure and offers no mechanism to ensure that restoration keeps

¹⁵ Government of Alberta (2025). “Supplemental Standards Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan” at PDF page 6.

¹⁶ Government of Alberta (2025). “Supplemental Standards Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan” at PDF page 7.

¹⁷ Nagy-Reis, M., Dickie, M., Calvert, A.M., Hebblewhite, M., Hervieux, D., Seip, D. R., Gilbert, S.L., Venter, O., DeMars, C., Boutin, S., Serrouya, R. (2021). Habitat loss accelerates for the endangered woodland caribou in western Canada. *Conservation Science and Practice*, 2021;3e437.

¹⁸ Johnson, C.J., Ehlers, L.P.W. and Seip, D.R. (2015) Witnessing extinction – Cumulative impacts across landscapes and the future loss of an evolutionarily significant unit of woodland caribou in Canada. *Biological Conservation*, 186, 176–186. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2015.03.01>

¹⁹ Lamb, C.T., Steenweg, R., Serrouya, R., Hervieux, D., McNay, R.S., Heard, D.C., McLellan, B.N., Shores, C., Palm, E., Giguere, L., Hubner, J., Polfus, J., Klaczek, M., Crosland, N., White, S., Russel, M. and Ford, A. (2025) The Erosion of Threatened Southern Mountain Caribou Migration. *Global Change Biology*, **31**, e70095. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.70095>.

²⁰ Government of Alberta. Public Virtual Information Session (May 5, 2025).

pace with new disturbance. AWA is concerned that the cumulative impacts of oil and gas disturbance on caribou habitat are being underestimated, and that the absence of firm disturbance limits will lead to continued degradation of the landscape.

In addition to facilitating road construction, the US-SRP plan will allow for the continued development of new disturbance features without defined limits. The plan promises to establish targets for the restoration of inactive and non-productive oil and gas features; however, there is no commitment to balance new construction with the restoration of existing features. As mentioned earlier, lengthy time-lags in achieving ecological restoration would lead to ongoing increases in habitat disturbance and diminished undisturbed critical habitat.

Ultimately, the US-SRP's proposal to commence the restoration of legacy geophysical exploration lines and other linear features is poorly conceived and ineffective for managing the anthropogenic footprint, as it concurrently permits new disturbances that will further degrade additional habitat.

Without stronger protections and meaningful constraints on new development, particularly considering the existing poor track record of restoring seismic lines²¹, the US-SRP would ensure the ongoing and rapid degradation rather than effective management of the subregion's natural resources, including the few remaining patches of undisturbed caribou winter habitat that would have been spared from timber harvesting.

Creation of Conservation Areas

AWA supports the creation of Nature First Zones, that is Conservation Areas A (Caw Ridge, Sulphur Ridge and Coal/Horn/Torrens Ridge) and B (upper foothills around Sheep Creek, montane areas west of the Smoky River and Sulphur River, and alpine and subalpine areas of Lightning Ridge), and applauds the recognition of their ecological and conservation values in the US-SRP. These areas contain highly sensitive landscapes and watersheds that provide core habitat for several species, including critical summer habitat for caribou. These zones will also contribute to the increase in protected areas across the eastern slopes. Given the ecological relevance of these areas, AWA would like to see them permanently protected through legal designation under the Alberta Provincial Parks Act.

Timeframe and Metrics for the Sub-Regional Plan Monitoring and Evaluation

The draft includes a list of monitoring indicators but does not specify the timeframe for their release. In line with Alberta's commitment under SARA section 11²², public reports on caribou local populations and range habitat metrics should be released annually. Similarly, annual monitoring should provide the percentage and location of the range that is undisturbed or on a trajectory to undisturbed status. Thus, to fully understand this figure, the list of monitoring indicators should include Anthropogenic Footprint, defined as the area of anthropogenic disturbance, for each originating activity.

Annual reporting of these metrics, particularly biophysical caribou habitat, anthropogenic footprints, and natural disturbances, is required to trigger a plan assessment as specified in Objective 17.2. It will also demonstrate Alberta's commitment to transparency and accountability.

²¹Nagy-Reis, M., Dickie, M., Calvert, A.M., Hebblewhite, M., Hervieux, D., Seip, D.R., Gilbert, S.L., Venter, O., DeMars, C., Boutin, S. and Serrouya, R. (2021) Habitat loss accelerates for the endangered woodland caribou in western Canada. *Conservation Science and Practice*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.437>.

²² SARA, s 12

Legal Framework of the Draft Upper-Smoky Sub-Regional Plan

As currently drafted, the US-SRP risks contravening applicable federal and provincial legislation, specifically Alberta's Land Stewardship Act and the Section 11 Agreement under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). These legal conflicts undermine the plan's credibility, mislead investors, and call into question Alberta's commitment to sustainable forest management and land-use planning.

Under the *Land Stewardship Act*, the Cabinet may amend a regional plan following public consultation and legislative presentation. Such amendments become part of the regional plan regulation and are legally binding on the Crown, local government bodies, decision makers, and "all other persons"²³. In exercising this authority, Cabinet must uphold the *Act's* purposes, including enabling sustainable development by considering and responding to the cumulative effects of industrial activities²⁴. However, the US-SRP proposes extensive clear-cutting in the winter ranges of the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou populations, essentially disabling the potential for the southern mountain caribou recovery^{25,26}. By approving this harvest plan, Cabinet would exceed its authority under the *Act*, exposing the province to legal risk and undermining the plan's stated outcomes. These actions could also prompt federal intervention under SARA, including the issuance of an emergency order.

The US-SRP is also incompatible with the Section 11 Agreement, which Alberta signed in 2020 after the federal Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) Minister recommended an Emergency Order to protect southern mountain caribou. The agreement was presented as a legally sufficient alternative to federal intervention, intended to achieve recovery targets and protect critical habitat. However, the current US-SRP fails to meet these commitments and actively permits the destruction of identified winter range, undermining both the intent and implementation of the agreement, particularly concerning as it is up for renewal in October 2025.

The draft US-SRP undermines Alberta's stated land-use and species-at-risk commitments by failing to comply with applicable provincial and federal laws. By allowing extensive industrial activity in key caribou ranges, the plan may also restrict Weyerhaeuser Company Limited's commitment to operate according to the principles of sustainable forest management (particularly in the preamble and sections 7(5), 9(1), 13(3) and (4), and 24 of the Forest Management Agreement)²⁷.

Furthermore, the US-SRP would contravene applicable standards and professional responsibilities for land management and forestry. Under the authority of the *Forests Act*, Alberta has established strict standards for forest management planning, which require Forest Management Plans to uphold

²³ *Land Stewardship Act*, s 15.

²⁴ Section 11 Agreement at 5, s 1, "Subregional plan".

²⁵ Environment Canada. 2014. Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou, Southern Mountain population (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) in Canada. *Species at Risk Act Recovery Strategy Series*. Environment Canada, Ottawa. viii + 103 pp

²⁶ Lamb, C.T., Steenweg, R., Serrouya, R., Hervieux, D., McNay, R.S., Heard, D.C., McLellan, B.N., Shores, C., Palm, E., Giguere, L., Hubner, J., Polfus, J., Klaczek, M., Crosland, N., White, S., Russel, M. and Ford, A. (2025) The Erosion of Threatened Southern Mountain Caribou Migration. *Global Change Biology*, 31, e70095. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.70095>.

²⁷ Memorandum of Agreement, FMA6900016 online: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/fma-oc-503-207><https://open.alberta.ca/publications/fma-oc-503-207>.

biological diversity by preventing landscape fragmentation (Objective 1.1.1.2) and maintaining habitat for species at risk (Objective 1.2.1.1). The US-SRP will fail in both respects²⁸.

AWA urges the Government of Alberta to revise the draft US-SRP to ensure compliance with relevant provincial and federal legislation.

Background

Southern Mountain Caribou are listed as “Threatened” under the federal SARA²⁹. As a SARA listed species, their critical habitat receives automatic protection on federal lands once identified in a recovery strategy³⁰. However, on provincial lands, including the entirety of the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway ranges in Alberta, critical habitat is not protected unless Cabinet issues an order³¹.

SARA defines critical habitat as “habitat that is necessary for the survival or recovery of a listed wildlife species and that is identified as the species’ critical habitat in the recovery strategy or in an action plan for the species.”³² The 2014 *Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou, Southern Mountain population (Rangifer tarandus caribou) in Canada* identifies critical habitat for southern, central, and northern groups of Southern Mountain Caribou.³³ While it includes mapped areas for these herds in British Columbia, the Recovery Strategy does not include mapped critical habitat for the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway herds in Alberta.³⁴ Instead, it describes the biophysical attributes of their critical habitat³⁵, which vary by the herds’ seasonal range.³⁶

In 2018, ECCC conducted an imminent threat assessment that found southern mountain caribou face imminent threats to recovery, including threats from habitat loss caused by industrial, commercial, recreational land uses, and natural disturbances.³⁷ Following that finding, the ECCC Minister recommended that Cabinet issue an emergency order to protect the species. However, Cabinet declined, citing the potential for conservation agreements under section 11 of SARA to address these threats.³⁸

In October 2020, the government of Alberta and Canada signed the *Agreement for the Conservation and Recovery of the Woodland Caribou in Alberta* under SARA’s section 11. Section 11 allows the federal

²⁸ Government of Alberta. 2006. Alberta forest management planning standard. Version 4.1.

<https://open.alberta.ca/publications/3491799>

²⁹ Species at risk public registry, “Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*), Southern Mountain Caribou”, online: <https://species-registry.canada.ca/index-en.html#/species/638-253>

³⁰ SARA, ss 58(1) and 61.

³¹ SARA, s 61.

³² SARA, s 2(1), “critical habitat”.

³³ Environment Canada, *Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou, Southern Mountain population (Rangifer tarandus caribou) in Canada* (2014), online:

https://ecprccsarstact.z9.web.core.windows.net/files/SARAFiles/legacy/plans/rs_woodland%20caribou_bois_s_mtn_0614_e.pdf

³⁴ Recovery Strategy at PDF page 89-90.

³⁵ Recovery Strategy at Table C-2, PDF page 107-108. Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway herds are in the Central Group of Southern Mountain Caribou: see Recovery Strategy at Table 3, PDF page 20.

³⁶ Recovery Strategy at Table C-2, PDF page 107-108.

³⁷ Environment and Climate Change Canada, “Imminent Threat Assessment for Southern Mountain Caribou” at 1-2, online: https://www.registrelep-sararegistry.gc.ca/virtual_sara/files/ImminentThreatAnalysisSmc-v00-2018Jun-Eng.pdf.

³⁸ Government of Canada, “Statement: Government of Canada’s approach to addressing the imminent threats to the recovery of Southern Mountain Caribou”, online: <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate->

government to enter into conservation agreements with provinces **to benefit species at risk or enhance their survival in the wild.**³⁹ These agreements are intended to implement conservation measures consistent with the purpose of SARA.

The Section 11 Agreement aims “to support the conservation and recovery of woodland caribou local populations to naturally self-sustaining status, consistent with the population and distribution objectives and critical habitat outcomes outlined in the [Recovery Strategy] and aligned with A Woodland Caribou Policy for Alberta (2011).”⁴⁰ The Recovery Strategy states that the objective for Southern Mountain Caribou is to “increase the size of all [herds] to self-sustaining levels.”⁴¹ It further notes that the identified critical habitat is necessary to meet these objectives.⁴² Alberta’s 2011 Caribou Policy similarly commits the province to achieving naturally sustaining populations and prioritizing initiatives that include “critical habitat retention.”⁴³

Under the Section 11 Agreement, Alberta committed to developing sub-regional plans to support caribou recovery. These plans are described as “outcomes-based” and are enabled through the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* to address location-specific issues and cumulative effects.⁴⁴ Specifically, for the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway ranges, the government of Alberta committed to completing sub-regional plans that achieve the critical habitat outcomes described in the Recovery Strategy. The current plan fails to uphold these requirements.

³⁹ SARA, s 11(1).

⁴⁰ Section 11 Agreement at 5, s 2. The Section 11 Agreement defines critical habitat in reference to the recovery strategies for Boreal Caribou and Southern Mountain Caribou: Section 11 Agreement at 4, s 1, “Critical habitat”.

⁴¹ Recovery Strategy at PDF page 6.

⁴² Recovery Strategy at PDF page 6.

⁴³ Government of Alberta, *A Woodland Caribou Policy for Alberta* (June 2011) at 1, online: <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/debdf4b3-d004-42a1-ab1a-6ac456362915/resource/b72d06b1-e3ec-4bbf-92e9-dfb67e601f49/download/2011-woodlandcariboupolicy-alberta-jun2011.pdf> [Woodland Caribou Policy].

⁴⁴ Section 11 Agreement at 5, s 1, “Subregional plan”.