



COULD COLLABORATING WITH THE FORESTRY INDUSTRY HELP SAVE CARIBOU?

In March 2019, the BC government announced a proposed strategy to recover southern mountain caribou populations through two draft agreements developed under the *Federal Species at Risk Act*. These agreements call for the protection of sensitive caribou habitat within an already depleting Timber Harvesting Land-base (THLB) in the Interior, and if passed will result in a reduction of timber available for harvest in the Mackenzie and Peace TSA, and TFL 48. With recent declines in the allowable annual cut (AAC) throughout the Interior, this caribou initiative would result in the loss of additional jobs and the possible closure of at least one sawmill.

The Caribou Recovery plan includes two agreements: a draft Section 11 agreement developed by the Federal and Provincial government to improve the caribou situation throughout the Interior; and the draft Partnership Agreement, between Canada, BC, and First Nations groups whose traditional territories overlap the range of the “central group” herds. This range stretches along the Rocky Mountains from the Alberta border, northwest beyond Chetwynd, BC, and west past Mackenzie. The latter of these two agreements has called for an interim moratorium on forestry (and other resources) activities on areas deemed to be of good caribou habitat. These areas total about 750,000 hectares, of which about 10 per cent is located within the THLB (this number does not include moratorium areas located within Canfor’s TFL 48). The volume that would be removed from the AAC, according to government experts, is about 300,000 m³/year. However industry has suggested that this number is closer to half a million. Regardless of the actual amount, the result would still have a very negative economic impact in the forestry communities that rely on this timber volume.

While most will agree with the importance of protecting BC’s southern mountain caribou, many in the forestry community feel that government and First Nations has taken the easy way out by blaming the industry for habitat loss and proposing a complete shut-down of the area. The government’s proposal is an act of passive instead of active management, and instead of maintaining our obligation to manage all species within our forests, they are proposing that the caribou be left to fend for themselves.

Foresters in BC have been actively managing for caribou for decades:

- Caribou habitat results and strategies are a common part of landscape and site level forestry plans that are diligently followed by logging contractors and licensees.
- Field workers are trained to identify and preserve areas of high lichen growth and overall good habitat.

Yet through the course of numerous public consultations and meetings between the government and interest groups, I have yet to hear it reported that forestry could be utilized as part of the solution. Instead of proposing a moratorium, government should be proposing caribou habitat strategies that involve harvesting and silviculture techniques to improve habitat. Such strategies may include:

- Conducting terrestrial and arboreal lichen surveys on the ground to better define the location of high habitat areas, movement corridors, areas with forest health issues and so on;
- Proposing “harvesting approaches that retain some canopy cover may be an effective way to promote lichen survival across a managed landscape” (Vitt, Finnegan, House 2019). Examples would include partial cut harvesting and mark-to-cut selective logging to thin out stands;

- “By lowering the stem density and opening up the canopy, partial cutting may improve the passability of a stand” (Lance, Mills 1993). The stand passability allows caribou to move easier along migration routes, to detect predators quicker and provides an easier means of escape;
- Conduct salvage operations in areas that have been devastated by mountain pine beetle, and more recently spruce beetle, to minimize the fire hazard and to increase passability in these stands that are, or will, be inundated by deadfall.

The government’s proposed plan to shut down all natural resource operations in the moratorium area seems to be the usual simplistic, passive strategy that fuels uncertainty and concern about mill closures and job losses. These fears are warranted because the forest industry has long been used as a scapegoat for all of the negative attention the Provincial and Federal governments get over environmental issues, both nationally and internationally.

Perhaps it is time for governments to look at the forest industry as part of the solution. We should employ active management where silviculture and harvesting techniques are showcased to the world as a way to save a species at risk. There are no guarantees that a moratorium would work; the failed attempt to save the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest and the economic devastation that it caused is a perfect example. Adaptive management that includes everyone in actively contributing to protect the species just might save a few forestry jobs in the process. 🌲

Paul Schuetz has spent more than 20 years working in the Northern Interior forests with Industrial Forestry Service Ltd. His experience in timber cruising, road engineering and crew management give him unique insights into contractor issues in the north. If you have an issue you want to bring to the TLA, call Paul at 250-564-4115.