

The challenge of managing woodland caribou habitat in Alberta: a forest management perspective.

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In Alberta, traditional management of first rotation forests targets older stands to be harvested first under a two or three pass harvest system. Such strategies do not address the long-term habitat needs of woodland caribou and may be contrary to their needs for relatively large contiguous tracts of older stands.

Recognizing that a change from traditional forest management is necessary, Weyerhaeuser Company has developed a comprehensive habitat management program. Its innovative approach centers on ensuring that large amounts of “overmature” forest are maintained in perpetuity on caribou ranges and that this forest is kept in relative large, unfragmented patches.

The plan requires harvesting to be concentrated in one contiguous area at a time rather than harvesting across the entire range using a traditional two- or three-pass harvest pattern. This will avoid fragmentation of the entire range early in the harvest sequence, which limits opportunities to adjust practices as needed.

It is not certain whether Weyerhaeuser’s program will succeed in maintaining caribou habitat. Numerous questions remain as to how much harvesting can be conducted and what spatial pattern of harvesting is appropriate to meet the habitat needs of caribou. Also, the potential impact of changes in predator-prey relationships is not known. Moreover, the activities of other industrial sectors, including other forest companies operating within the same caribou ranges, are not subject to Weyerhaeuser’s plan.

While new forest management practices are a welcome change, the maintenance of viable caribou populations in working landscapes will not succeed if it is left to the stewardship of individual forest companies. Removing woodland caribou from the threatened/endangered species list requires the full participation of all stakeholders, coordination of land use activities, and, most importantly, government direction and leadership. Without real government commitment to adopt and implement recovery plans and adjust policies as required, no advance in scientific knowledge or corporate goodwill will remove a species from the brink of extinction.