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Potholes in the Road to Recovery: Mountain Caribou Audit Raises Questions About Government Efforts to Recover BC's Herds

With some herds worse off than before, environmentalists say government needs to fulfill their commitment to ensuring science-based protection of mountain caribou

VANCOUVER, BC -- A coalition of ten leading environmental groups have released an audit that raises serious concerns about the BC government's efforts to recover the province's remaining Mountain Caribou six months after the government's October 2007 protection announcement. Conducted by Dr. Lee Harding, a former Environment Canada senior scientist and administrator, the audit reveals that while the government appears to be on track for legislating habitat protections under the agreement, a growing number of "cut corners" are threatening the originally promised science-based protection.

"The audit shows that a growing number of shortcuts and setbacks are threatening the recovery of mountain caribou, with some herds worse off than before," says Candace Batycki, Director of Forest Regions for ForestEthics, which commissioned the audit. "We need to see protection on the ground, and we need to see it soon."

Some of the key concerns identified by the audit include:

- Habitat has yet to be legally protected.
- There has been no progress moving animals from stronger herds to weaker ones, with potentially dire consequences for the South Purcells herd where fewer than 20 animals remain.
- Government calculation errors have short-changed the Cariboo-Chilcotin protection area by 23,000 hectares (48% less than was recommended by scientists).
- Recreation management is behind schedule, with no closures in place and no Stewardship Management Agreements signed with snowmobile clubs.
- Budget shortfalls in the Integrated Land Management Bureau are creating staffing and resource uncertainty, threatening to derail the viability of recovery efforts.

Many of the concerns identified by the audit were outlined by the coalition in a letter to Minister Pat Bell on March 17, 2008. On March 21, 2008, ForestEthics launched a transparency blog, "The Road to Recovery" (www.forestethics.org/roadtorecovery) to report on the implementation process and keep the government accountable.



“It has been six months since the government's original announcement, and for six months we've been working diligently to keep recovery efforts on track,” says John Bergenske of Wildsight. “Let's not forget that the reason we're here in the first place is because tens of thousands of British Columbians demanded science-based protection for these animals. The government needs to show they are serious about keeping their commitments; they need to legalize habitat protection.”

Additional concerns identified by the coalition include:

- Government has not yet drawn hard protection lines in the Central Selkirks and is still considering an “aspatial approach” which would rely on timber companies to protect habitat within their operating areas; this despite calls from herd biologists, Ministry of Environment and environmental groups for hard lines and real protection.
- The habitat area over which the government has stated they will consider limiting mining is too small; all 2.2 million hectares of caribou habitat need to be considered.
- The Revelstoke-Shuswap area has been short-changed by 2,100 hectares (21% less than was originally agreed upon).

ForestEthics has commissioned Dr. Harding to conduct a follow-up audit to track progress at the one-year anniversary of the October 2007 announcement.

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The audit is available on the web at www.forestethics.ca.

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