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Re: WCS Canada Comments on the draft Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan

To whom it may concern:

I am writing in response to the Government of Alberta's draft Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan (SRP). My comments draw on over two decades of experience in caribou conservation and management, as well as broader work in land-use planning, environmental impact assessment, and biodiversity policy. I co-led national assessments of all 10 caribou designatable units as co-chair of the Terrestrial Mammals Subcommittee of the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) for nine years and have advised both federal and provincial governments on caribou recovery and critical habitat. I also served on the federal advisory committee that identified critical habitat for boreal caribou and contributed to recovery strategies for both boreal and southern mountain populations. I am familiar with Alberta's sub-regional planning processes and the status of caribou populations across the province, including the Cold Lake and Bistcho sub-regional plans.

This submission provides my assessment of three major areas where the Upper Smoky draft plan falls dramatically short of Alberta's stated commitments under sub-regional planning and related agreements: (1) its failure to deliver credible range plans for the two mountain caribou populations and sanctioning of continued critical habitat destruction; (2) the absence of a functional cumulative effects management framework; and (3) the disregard for the input of both the West-Central Caribou Sub-Regional Task Force and Indigenous Peoples, despite clear commitments to incorporate their perspectives into sub-regional planning.

These are not peripheral concerns; they go to the heart of what sub-regional planning is intended to achieve. While many other aspects of the draft plan warrant scrutiny, this submission focuses on three core deficiencies with the most serious implications for ecological integrity, species recovery, and public confidence in land-use governance. These are also areas in which the Government of Alberta has made clear and repeated commitments, both in policy and through intergovernmental agreements. The failure to meet those commitments in the draft Upper Smoky SRP undermines the credibility of the sub-regional planning process itself.

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1) **Failure to deliver credible range plans for the two mountain caribou populations and sanctioning of continued critical habitat destruction**

Alberta's commitments to range planning for woodland caribou date back nearly two decades, beginning with the 2005 provincial Recovery Plan[1] and reaffirmed through the 2011 caribou policy[2]. These commitments were subsequently embedded in two conservation agreements with the federal government under Section 11 of the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA)—first in 2016, then in 2020—each accompanied by significant federal funding. Both agreements obligated Alberta to develop range plans for all 15 caribou ranges in the province, consistent with federal guidance. Under the 2020 agreement[3], Alberta committed to using the Sub-Regional Planning (SRP) framework as the mechanism for meeting its obligations.

The draft Upper Smoky SRP does not meet even the minimum requirements of a credible range plan. It provides no pathway to achieve or maintain the federal threshold of 65% undisturbed habitat[4], which is the minimum necessary to support self-sustaining populations and avoid federal intervention. Nor does it offer the other essential elements of range planning: a spatially defined disturbance baseline, enforceable limits on new footprint, prioritized restoration zones, or regulatory mechanisms with timelines and measurable outcomes. Instead, it substitutes vague aspirations and flexible provisions designed to maintain industrial access. Restoration is framed as a post-development activity for retiring economically redundant footprint—not as a tool to recover ecological function—rendering it a performative gesture rather than a serious recovery measure. Predator control continues to be used as a substitute for habitat protection, deferring any meaningful recovery.

Even more troubling is the draft SRP's active facilitation of habitat destruction in areas critical to caribou survival. Although it refers broadly to "undisturbed habitat," the draft plan includes no mapping, regulatory protection, or spatial analysis of critical habitat as defined under federal guidance. It provides no assessment of cumulative disturbance and no constraints on future degradation. This omission leaves essential winter range -- including peatland and foothill habitats -- unprotected and exposed to further industrial development.

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[1] Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Team (2005). Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan 2004/5-2013-14. Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Fish and Wildlife Division. Alberta Species At Risk Recovery Plan No. 4. Edmonton, AB.

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

[3] https://open.alberta.ca/publications/agreement-for-the-conservation-and-recovery-of-the-woodland-caribou-in-alberta

[4] 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.

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The implications for the Redrock–Prairie Creek and Narraway populations are severe. The SRP would enable extensive logging across their remaining winter ranges, including areas that are both biophysically suitable and still occupied by caribou. Planned harvest over the next 26 years overlaps almost entirely with known movement corridors and wintering areas, effectively eliminating the last viable habitat for these populations. The draft plan includes no mechanism to identify or safeguard peatlands that serve as key winter refuge, leaving them potentially open to peat extraction. These actions violate both the intent and the specific provisions of Alberta's Section 11 agreement and are inconsistent with the province's obligations under *SARA*. They also foreclose any credible pathway to population recovery.

Both populations already occupy highly disturbed landscapes and persist only through intensive predator control. The Redrock–Prairie Creek population, in particular, has shown no underlying improvement in habitat condition despite this intervention. Without aggressive and enforceable measures to restore functional habitat, both populations remain on a path toward further decline and likely extirpation.

Mechanisms such as zoning, restoration levels, and access categories are designed to preserve industrial flexibility rather than to guide land use in alignment with Alberta's commitments to caribou recovery and cumulative effects management. "Nature-first" zones are mostly confined to high-elevation areas under low development pressure and are not aligned with core caribou range. Regulatory provisions lack binding authority and carry no consequences for non-compliance. Timelines are absent, restoration targets are vague, and measurable indicators are entirely missing—further weakening the credibility and enforceability of the draft plan.

Taken together, these deficiencies confirm that the Upper Smoky SRP is not a legitimate caribou range plan. It not only fails to meet federal planning standards but actively sanctions the destruction of the last remaining winter habitat for two already imperiled mountain caribou populations, in direct contradiction of Alberta's legal and policy commitments.

2) **Absence of a functional cumulative effects management framework**

Alberta's own land-use planning framework identifies sub-regional and regional plans as key mechanisms for managing the cumulative effects of resource development on air, water, land, and biodiversity.[5] Any land use plans, therefore, should integrate multiple land-use pressures, set place-based environmental outcomes, and assess both existing and future activities in order to prevent ecological degradation and ensure long-term sustainability. The draft Upper Smoky SRP does not reflect or operationalize this approach.

[5] https://www.alberta.ca/land-use-framework-overview.aspx; https://www.alberta.ca/environment-and-land-use-planning.aspx

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While the draft plan contains some references to cumulative effects, there is little evidence that the concept is framed or applied in a meaningful way. The draft provides no cumulative effects management framework, no ecological targets or thresholds to guide land-use decisions, and no integrated structure for evaluating or limiting total disturbance across sectors or landscapes. There is no stated ecological baseline, no mapping of disturbance, and no spatial prioritization of intact or sensitive areas. The absence of risk-based triggers or enforceable limits makes it impossible to assess when and where development should be constrained to avoid irreversible harm. From a cumulative effects perspective, the Upper Smoky SRP is not simply inadequate—it is functionally absent.

Where cumulative effects are acknowledged, the references are largely symbolic or inconsequential. For example, Section 17.2.1 introduces numeric triggers for plan reassessment in response to natural disturbance events—but these do not apply to human-caused disturbance and do not guarantee any management response. This limited approach does not constitute a functional cumulative effects system, nor does it provide a mechanism to guide or constrain land-use approvals based on ecological conditions.

Instead, the structure and logic of the draft plan consistently prioritize enabling development over managing impact. The draft plan is organized around the operational needs of individual industries—forestry, oil and gas, coal, peat—without integration across sectors or consideration of cumulative landscape effects. Wildlife sensitivity areas are not aligned with access restrictions, restoration priorities, or zoning, and carry no legal weight. Regulatory mechanisms emphasize flexibility for approvals, not enforceable limits or thresholds. This is not cumulative effects management—it is status quo industrial expansion, minimally repackaged.

The draft plan fails to provide even the minimal elements of a cumulative effects management system. It does not define baseline conditions, set thresholds, forecast future scenarios, or coordinate across land-use sectors. Monitoring is referenced but not linked to any decision-making processes. By omitting these essential components, the draft plan cannot credibly claim to manage cumulative effects—either for caribou or for the broader ecological integrity of the Upper Smoky region. By any credible standard, it lacks the foundational structure required to guide land-use decisions in a cumulative effects context and offers no defensible approach to managing environmental outcomes amid continued industrial expansion.

3) **Disregard for the input of both the West-Central Caribou Sub-Regional Task Force and Indigenous Peoples**

The Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan has been publicly framed by the Government of Alberta as a mechanism for developing land-use guidance that reflects regional input

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and Indigenous perspectives. The government has committed to drawing on two primary sources of input: (1) locally based task forces established to provide recommendations on land-use planning for caribou recovery and economic development; and (2) separate Indigenous engagement processes intended to ensure that Indigenous knowledge, values, and rights are considered and respected.

According to the province, task forces were created "to provide recommendations to government on land-use planning that will support caribou recovery while promoting economic development and respecting the constitutionally protected rights of Indigenous Peoples."[6] The draft plan itself states that "the Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan was informed by recommendations of a Ministerial Task Force," and the government's engagement webpage affirms that Indigenous engagement is being undertaken "to ensure Indigenous perspectives are heard and explored."[7] Yet the resulting draft plan shows little evidence that either Task Force recommendations or Indigenous input meaningfully influenced its content.

The West-Central Caribou Sub-Regional Task Force was chaired by a Member of the Legislative Assembly and included a wide range of stakeholders, including industry and municipal representatives. Its recommendations aimed to strike a "balance" between supporting caribou recovery and maintaining long-term economic opportunities. It called for an integrated land-use strategy grounded in cumulative effects management, coordinated access, and measurable progress on habitat restoration. For caribou specifically, the Task Force endorsed movement toward the 65% undisturbed habitat threshold identified in the federal recovery strategy, while minimizing disruption to existing economic activity. It also recommended that planning processes consider other species of concern, including Bull Trout, Arctic Grayling, Grizzly Bear, and Barred Owl, none of which is mentioned. Tools such as Integrated Land Management, a binding Access Management Plan, and targeted restoration were recommended to support this balance. These recommendations have been largely sidelined in the draft, which provides no explanation of how Task Force input was incorporated.

The draft plan also gives minimal weight to Indigenous perspectives, despite significant participation by communities in numerous consultation and regulatory processes -- even in the face of limited capacity. While it acknowledges that Indigenous Peoples "value landscape intactness and biodiversity," this is framed as a cultural viewpoint rather than a guiding principle for land-use decision-making. The Upper Smoky SRP includes only the barest references to Indigenous use, knowledge, or governance. It makes no effort to reflect Indigenous laws, knowledge systems, or cumulative concerns in its zoning or implementation logic.

[6] https://www.alberta.ca/caribou-sub-regional-task-forces

[7] https://www.alberta.ca/upper-smoky-sub-regional-plan-engagement#:~:text=Indigenous%20engagement,perspectives%20are%20heard%20and%20explored.

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While I defer to Indigenous communities and organizations to speak fully to the depth and scope of their concerns, I feel compelled to acknowledge the consistent and serious concerns raised by many Indigenous Peoples in the region regarding the uncontrolled pace and scale of development and its erosion of their ability to meaningfully exercise Aboriginal and treaty rights. These communities have called for land-use frameworks that reflect Indigenous knowledge, values, and rights, and have repeatedly requested collaborative, rights-based approaches to caribou recovery and cumulative effects assessment. None of these calls are reflected in the draft plan.

By failing to incorporate input from both the West-Central Caribou Task Force and Indigenous Peoples -- each identified by the government as essential to the planning process -- Alberta has weakened the legitimacy of the Upper Smoky SRP and cast doubt on its willingness to uphold its own stated commitments.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The shortcomings identified in this submission are not matters of technical refinement or missing detail -- they are foundational. For example, the draft Upper Smoky SRP is so fundamentally misaligned with the purpose and structure of a caribou range plan that it cannot be revised or repaired in its current form. It fails to incorporate the most basic elements of recovery planning and disregards both the scientific evidence base and the recommendations of the West-Central Caribou Task Force and Indigenous Peoples.

Rather than suggesting adjustments or incremental improvements, the only appropriate path forward is for Alberta to withdraw this draft and restart the planning process. A new draft must be developed from the ground up, with a clear mandate to support caribou recovery, in alignment with federal policy, Alberta's own caribou recovery plan and policy, its Section 11 agreement with the federal government, and its stated objectives of land use planning as a tool for integrated, responsible land-use management.

Yours sincerely,

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