

Woodland caribou . . .

Sectors join forces to make population conservation a reality

By REBECCA DIBBELT

Industrial development and caribou conservation are not mutually exclusive, believes Rick Bonar, West Fraser's chief biologist and planning coordinator in Hinton.

Bonar has been a key player in creation of a caribou conservation association that will be launched officially later this spring.

While the provincial government is hard at work drafting caribou recovery plans, industry is taking a proactive approach that will lead to support of the government's mission to preserve caribou habitat, Bonar said.

"Resource activity and healthy caribou populations are not mutually exclusive," said Bonar. "It can work, if we're smart and work together."

Last fall, Weldwood (now West Fraser Mills) identified a gap in existing partnerships and programs and "wanted to do more" regarding the caribou situation, said Bonar. That helped spearhead the development of the Caribou Conservation Association, anchored by West Fraser, Alberta Newsprint Company and Canfor. Foothills Forest Products of Grande Cache and Weyerhaeuser have expressed interest,

and eight oil and gas companies may sign on as supporting and funding partners, Bonar said. The Alberta government will participate in an ex-officio role.

According to Bob Demulder, manager of the Integrated Land Management program at the Alberta Chamber of Resources, the new association is "an excellent example of integrated management in action, featuring integrated approaches and cooperative solutions to immediate landscape problems that impact the energy and forest industry."

As an example, Bonar points to the Suncor Conoco-Phillips pipeline. "Suncor is talking to forest management agreement holders and the Energy Utilities Board to ensure project plans and existing linear corridors are in keeping with caribou considerations," he said. "This new association could do the groundwork and provide fertile soil for



Caribou conservation receives a boost

integration to happen consistently, instead of on a project-by-project basis."

Modelling itself after the Foothills Growth and Yield Association, the caribou initiative will access the Foothills Model Forest structure in Hinton for research support, office space, administrative services

and an "honest third party." Core funding for the association will come through membership fees, with additional funds relating to individual projects.

Bonar added the federal government's Species at Risk legislation gives Alberta an opportunity to deliver a 'made in Alberta' approach that shows the province's forest managers are looking ahead, not only at resident caribou herds, but also at what fits with federal plans and priorities.

Rick Bonar can be reached at (780) 865-8193.

Weyerhaeuser "walks the walk" on caribou challenge

Integrating caribou habitat needs into forest management plans isn't new to Weyerhaeuser Company in Alberta. For two decades, the company has been working with government land, forest and natural resources managers to collect data and develop strategies for its Grande Prairie Forest Management Agreement (FMA) area.

In 1999, Weyerhaeuser modified its forest management agreements to accommodate caribou habitat needs,

Based on the best science available, Weyerhaeuser believes that caribou habitat needs along the Eastern Slopes of Alberta are not being addressed with traditional forest management practices, Luigi Morgantini, Weyerhaeuser's biologist, said. "Caribou require older tree stands, and our first strategy is to ensure old growth is maintained across the entire FMA by extending rotation age." Traditionally forests in caribou ranges are cut using a two- or three-pass harvest pattern. "This practice is contrary to the animal's need for

relatively large contiguous tracts of older stands, offering more food and protection from predators," he said. Weyerhaeuser concentrates harvesting in large blocks to avoid forest and habitat fragmentation. The new contiguous harvest areas will regenerate as even-aged stands and will be spatially arranged so remaining parts of the caribou range are not isolated from one another. The result will be long-term perpetuation of quality caribou habitat.

Managing human access to critical habitat is also a key part of the strategy, and Weyerhaeuser will minimize the number of permanent roads as part of the way it addresses this issue.

Last February, the timber company imposed a five-year delay on harvesting more than 82,000 hectares in support of protection efforts for woodland caribou, while the provincial government has been working to create a caribou recovery plan. Woodland caribou currently range on approximately 400,000 hectares of Weyerhaeuser's FMA.

Morgantini said the suspension of

logging is "providing time to gather more information on caribou needs and to implement a caribou recovery plan in co-ordination with government and other stakeholders."

Over the last five years Weyerhaeuser has contributed \$1 million to caribou research carried out by personnel at the University of Alberta. The timber company's research strategy has led to outfitting 62 caribou with global positioning collars to track their movements. The aim, said Morgantini, is to assess the effectiveness of evolving practices.

Weyerhaeuser's changed practices have been recognized by the Alberta government's Status Report on Woodland Caribou (2001) and the company has also won an Alberta Emerald Award and a Wildlife Habitat Canada Award for its work in protecting caribou habitat.

Luigi Morgantini can be reached at (780) 453-9782.