

Executive Summary: Implications of the Alberta Government Draft Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan for Southern Mountain Caribou

April 2025



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ALBERTA CHAPTER OF
THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY



Alberta Wilderness Association

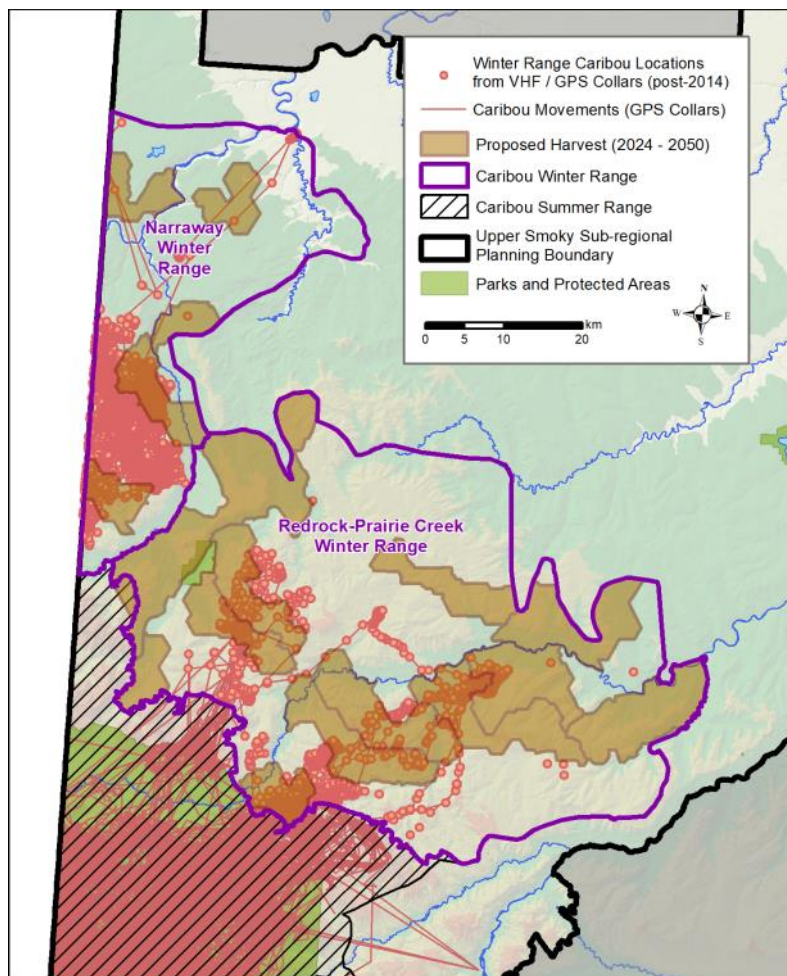


CANADIAN PARKS AND WILDERNESS SOCIETY
NORTHERN ALBERTA CHAPTER

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Executive Summary

This report outlines implications of Alberta's draft *Upper Smoky Sub-regional Plan* for the Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou populations – two of the province's last remaining southern mountain caribou populations. Sub-regional planning in Alberta was initiated to create landscape plans that enable caribou conservation and recovery (Alberta Environment and Protected Areas, 2025a), as committed to in the Agreement for the Conservation and Recovery of the Woodland Caribou signed between the governments of Canada and Alberta (Government of Canada and Government of Alberta 2020), and in Alberta's provincial woodland caribou policy (Government of Alberta 2011). Woodland caribou, including southern mountain caribou, are a species at risk and designated as threatened under both provincial and federal legislation (Alberta Wildlife Act 2022; Government of Canada 2002). The draft *Upper Smoky Sub-regional Plan*, released for public comment on March 25, 2025, provides recommendations for future industrial activities, including timber cutting and oil and gas development. Scientific evidence is clear – survival and recovery of southern mountain caribou



The first years of timber cutting would eliminate the ability of Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou to exist in their winter ranges.

Figure 1. First three periods of *Upper Smoky Sub-regional Plan* timber harvesting on Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway southern mountain caribou winter ranges, in relation to caribou radio-telemetry location points and movement lines (2014 - Jan 2025) (Alberta Environment and Protected Areas, 2025b). Notes: 1) Redrock-Prairie Creek winter range boundary drawn to separate forested foothills from mountains and is identical to the boundary of Weyerhaeuser's Forest Management Area, 2) 2014 date chosen to coincide with release of the national southern mountain caribou recovery strategy (Environment Canada 2014).

depends on the presence of both old forests and areas undisturbed by human developments (e.g., Courtois et al. 2007; DeCesare et al. 2014; Environment Canada 2011; Environment Canada 2012; Environment Canada 2014; Wittmer et al. 2007). However, the timber harvesting scenario described in the draft Upper Smoky sub-regional plan would allow Weyerhaeuser Company, an American based company, to clearcut virtually all the old winter range forests that are still occupied by Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou (Figure 1). The draft plan also fails to protect sufficient undisturbed habitat from both timber harvesting and oil and gas developments.

The first years of timber cutting and would eliminate the ability of Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou to exist in their winter ranges. By failing to provide the old forest and undisturbed habitats required by caribou, the sub-regional plan will not conserve or recover Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou and would instead risk their extirpation (local population extinction).

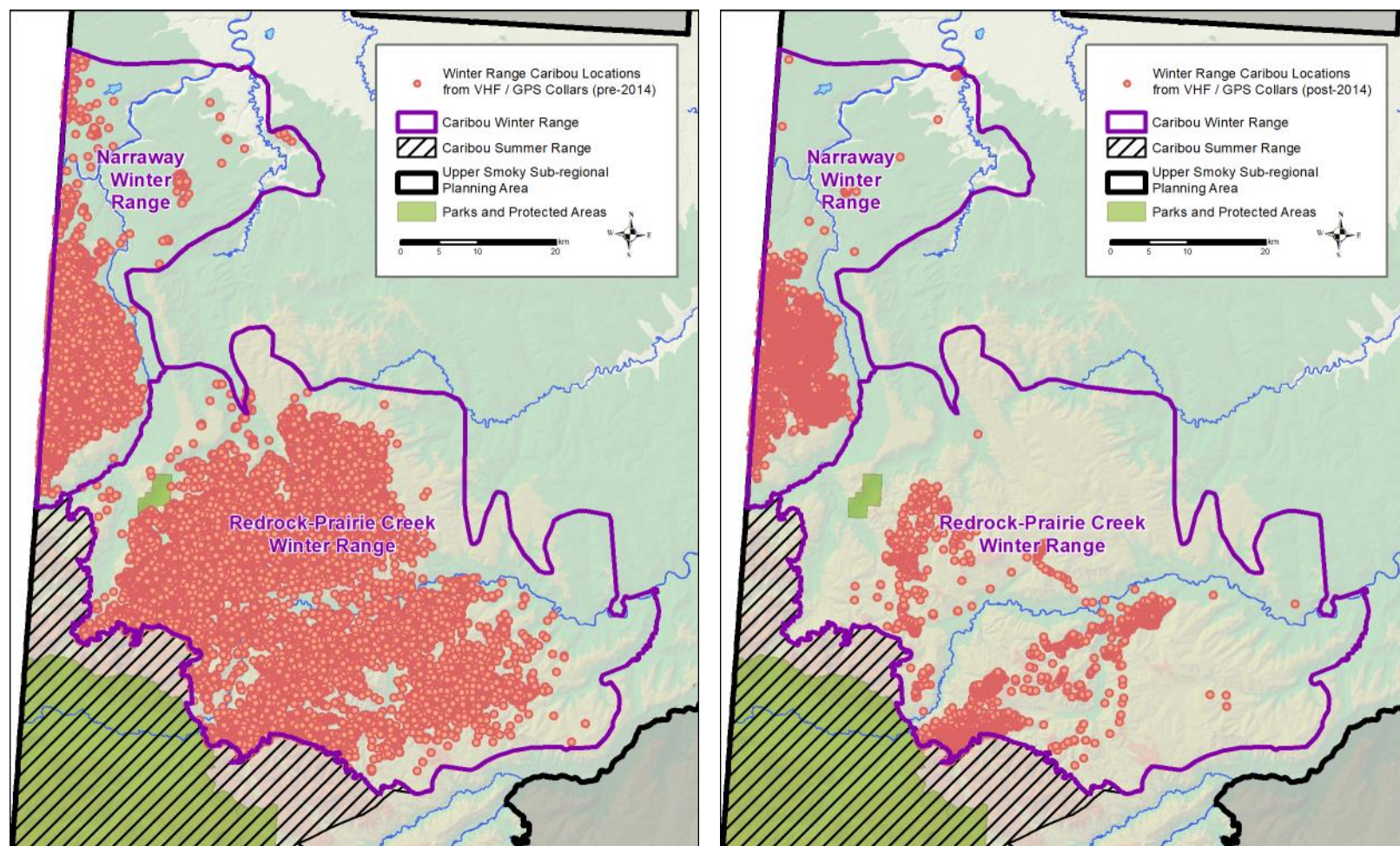


Figure 2. Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway Southern Mountain Caribou location points before (before 2014) and after (since 2014) caribou distribution decline associated with industrial developments on the winter ranges. From caribou radiotelemetry monitoring (Alberta Environment and Protected Areas 2025b).



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These populations have already suffered large declines in their population size, distribution (Figure 2) and ability to annually migrate due to decades of habitat destruction (Alberta Environment and Protected Areas 2024; Lamb et al. 2025; Williams et al. 2021). They are two of the last three southern mountain caribou populations remaining on Alberta’s provincial lands (Government of Alberta 2011).

The *Upper Smoky Sub-regional Plan* outlines the need for “A Balanced Approach”. However, in its current form, the draft plan does not strike a balance between industrial activity – particularly timber harvest – and caribou conservation and recovery. A revised plan must significantly reduce future habitat destruction and postpone further timber harvest to leave any hope of conserving and restoring caribou populations. The draft plan does not meaningfully address conservation outcomes to support these threatened southern mountain caribou populations.



Photo © M. Bradley



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