



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

First Nations legal challenge to protect woodland caribou goes to court; case seeks to force federal environment Minister to recommend emergency protection of caribou habitat in tar sands area

June 22, 2011, Edmonton, Alberta – First Nations and environmental groups are in Federal Court today and tomorrow seeking to force the federal government to uphold its legal duty to protect the habitat of the woodland caribou, a threatened species. This legal fight is the latest response to rampant industrial development in northeastern Alberta, including rapidly expanding tar sands developments. The aim is to protect remaining caribou populations from regional extinction.

“The caribou are disappearing,” said Chief Allan Adam of Athabasca Chipewyan. “We have asked the federal government to protect caribou, but nothing has been done. Alberta is also doing nothing to provide meaningful protection. The courts are the only route left to us. We launched this legal action because we are demanding the federal government call an immediate halt to the destruction of our lands, the land that sustains the caribou, our treaty rights and our culture.”

Chief Harry Sharphead of Enoch Cree Nation stated, “Government must act in accordance with what is best for all Canadians and not be driven by the oil industry’s agenda. We have watched the caribou herds dwindle while at the same time pipelines and tar sands infrastructure expand. This must stop.”

The judicial review application filed in September 2010 by the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Beaver Lake Cree Nation and Enoch Cree Nation asks the court to review the federal environment minister’s ongoing failure to prepare a recovery strategy for woodland caribou, and seeks to force the minister to recommend that Cabinet make an emergency order to protect woodland caribou in northeastern Alberta under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA).

“The idea is to protect remaining caribou habitat and force the federal government to consider a moratorium on all new developments in woodland caribou ranges in northeastern Alberta,” explained Jack Woodward, legal counsel for the applicants. “Under SARA, the government was required to put a recovery plan in place to protect woodland caribou by June of 2007, and it has failed to meet this mandatory legal duty. Our clients asked the federal government to provide interim emergency protection for the caribou, but the federal government ignored their request. We come to the courts asking that the federal government be forced to follow its own laws.”

Evidence filed in the judicial review includes a study completed by Dr. Stan Boutin, a caribou biologist at the University of Alberta. Dr. Boutin's report found two herd populations in Beaver Lake Cree Nation's traditional territories have plummeted by more than 70 per cent in just 12 years. Dr. Boutin concluded that the herds face extirpation (regional extinction) by 2025 without immediate habitat protection.

Chief Henry Gladue of Beaver Lake Cree Nation said: "For us, this is an example of why everyone should raise their voice against the tar sands developments. The caribou are already suffering. Will we let our other animals also disappear? We need habitat for our animals like the caribou to ensure there is a healthy surplus. These animals sustain us and as they die our future becomes uncertain. Mother Earth needs us to act now."

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Press note: This release can be found on the Woodward & Company website – www.woodwardandcompany.com. EcoJustice has also issued a press release available at www.ecojustice.ca.