

Northwest municipal committee thanks Minister Phillips for commitment to the economy

August 18, 2017 – Fort Vermilion, AB –The Northwest Species at Risk (NWSAR) Committee met with Alberta’s Environment and Parks Minister to discuss protecting the area’s Woodland Caribou.

The Committee achieved some positive reassurances from the Minister, especially through her public comments, that the province is considering the area’s economic and social well-being as it drafts plans to protect caribou.

Specifically, the Minister addressed many of the Committee’s concerns that it has been advocating for:

- The province has not committed to any protected areas or parks and specifically assured there will be no protected area or park in their draft caribou protection plans;
- They will work with local stakeholders to create caribou range plans that are for the long term;
- The government will get the public’s feedback on their draft plans before they finalize them;
- Any caribou protection plans will take an approach that ensures the environment and economy go hand in hand, ensuring northwest Alberta communities continue to be viable;
- The province’s plans will include socio-economic analysis to ensure the area’s communities are protected;
- Forestry and oil and gas tenures that are currently in place will remain;
- The province wants to avoid the federal government implementing an emergency protection order for caribou and instead wants to create an effective protection plan that consider local impacts – creating a solution that will avoid drastic measures imposed on the area if the caribou are not recovered.

The NWSAR committee has strongly advocated against the creation of a provincial or national park as a way to protect caribou. Instead, the committee has been advocating for a balanced approach to both protect the caribou and consider the socio-economic impacts to northwestern Alberta communities.

“We are happy to hear the Minister back away from the province’s previous commitment to permanently protect 1.8 million hectares of northwest Alberta,” said Lisa Wardley, Chair of the NWSAR Committee and Deputy Reeve of Mackenzie County.

“This means that our communities have hope to continue to remain viable after caribou range plans are implemented,” said Wardley.

The NWSAR committee provided a draft copy of their report to both the provincial and federal governments, outlining ideas for caribou protection as the province develops their plans.

Scientific data was collected and a wide range of experts and local stakeholders were engaged to draft their report, which can be viewed at AlbertaNWSAR.ca.

The NWSAR report has specific recommendations to effectively protect Woodland Caribou, while balancing the sustainability and economic future of northwest Alberta.

However, the Committee will continue to work hard to ensure that the Minister’s comments will turn into action by the provincial government and that implementation of caribou protection plans are beneficial for both caribou and our communities.

“Our work is not done. We are going to continue to push hard,” said Wardley.

“The province has yet to start their economic impact analysis, and it won’t be completed until 2019. We strongly believe it is necessary to continually demonstrate to the province the significant scope of the natural resource industries within the NWSAR region”.

Wardley continued, “The fact that there is \$1 billion of forestry activity and an estimated several billion barrels of oil and natural gas liquid reserves within caribou ranges in our region, is a big deal. There is potential for significant future development, especially in regards to oil and gas reserves, so we must ensure these opportunities continue to be available for development in the region. Any actions that have the potential to reduce the profitability of any industry in northwest Alberta will hit our communities hard and we can’t let that happen – for our sake and Alberta’s.”

To view the NWSAR report and recommendations visit: AlbertaNWSAR.ca

-30-

BACKGROUND

Woodland Caribou

Boreal Woodland Caribou are designated as a *threatened* species under federal and provincial legislation. Both levels of government require Recovery Strategies and Action Plans to protect boreal caribou. Range plans for each caribou herd is a requirement by the federal government.

Alberta is expected to put in place 15 draft Range Plans for 15 boreal caribou populations this October. The federal government is expected to provide a written response in April, 2018, that will deliver an assessment of whether or not the province’s draft range plans will provide meaningful progress towards fulfilling legislative requirements to protect and recover the Woodland Caribou.

NWSAR Committee Information

The Committee is comprised of municipal councillors from: Mackenzie County, County of Northern Lights, Town of High Level, Town of Rainbow Lake, Clear Hills County and the Town of Manning. For more information visit: AlbertaNWSAR.ca.

MEDIA CONTACT:

Lisa Wardley, NWSAR Chair & Deputy Reeve for Mackenzie County – available for media inquiries and interviews. 780-841-5799 lisa@mackenziecounty.com

Partial transcript of Minister of Environment and Parks interview with Peace River Broadcasting:

Interviewer:

“Will there be any economic activity allowed in the protected areas?”

Minister Phillips:

“I think we need to be really clear about what were talking about here. The province has not committee to any protected areas what so ever. We are here to talk to people about what caribou range planning looks like over the long term.

“We have not proposed any specific protected areas. There is no legislation to this effect. There is none of those things happening yet.

“What we have said, is that we need to have a caribou recovery strategy. Forestry companies agree with us. The oil and gas companies agree with us on that because they know that the cost of doing nothing is pretty darn high. Our approach is we need to make sure the environment and economy goes hand in hand – this is not something that the provincial government made up, actually the opposite. This is a federal government law that we have to follow so we’re going to find the right way to do that and balance the environment and the economy.

“If there are some protected area conversations to be had they will be had in the future – and nothing is on the table right now.

“One thing is off that table – and I want to be really clear – anywhere where there is current forestry tenure or oil and gas activity – that will remain there.

“There is absolutely no intention to change that. So anyone that tells you there is – is either misinformed or deliberately misinforming you”.

Interviewer:

“Is the plan still to convert 1.8 million hectares into parks following Eric Denhoff’s recommendations?”

Minister Phillips:

“Well there was some recommendations made as part of another range planning exercise further down south. We’ve examined those recommendations and really that’s just it. We have not done anything beyond that. Because we need to put together the specific range plans for Chinchaga, Bistou, Caribou Mountains areas and all the areas around High Level and within that we need to have further conversations with the forestry companies and with the oil and gas companies.

“You know, so far both of them have indicated that some form of conservation areas is probably a good idea, for the long term sustainability of the jobs and their businesses here in and around High Level, Manning and elsewhere.

“What they want is some certainty that the federal government is not going to walk in with an emergency protection order for these animals. I don’t want that either.

“So we’re going to work with these companies to make sure that we keep jobs and keep community viability. Certainly we’ll be working with the forestry and oil and gas companies. And if the municipalities want to work with us on that they’re welcome to do that too”.

Interviewer:

“There was a regional study that came out estimating the plan will cost forestry \$1 billion and 640 jobs annually – do you have a response to that study?”

Minister Phillips:

“Certainly I’ve talked to the forestry companies and they don’t think there is any validity to it and therefore neither do I”.

Interviewer:

“Are the plans still scheduled to be taking effect in October?”

Minister Phillips:

“There will be draft plans filed with the federal government by the end of October. They’re not taking effect. What will happen then is after the drafts are out for the public to react to – at that point then we will find ways to finalize them. But even in the draft plans you will not see a specific commitment to any kind of protected area or park.

“There will be areas that are under consideration for some kind of conservation measure but there is a number of different tools that we have in the tool box there.

“And what’s not under contemplation though, even within those draft plans, is any conservation tools on areas where current forestry tenure or oil and gas tenure exists.

“I want to be really clear about that. So this report that was put out contemplated that there would be all kinds of things happening in areas where you have existing tenure –

that is false. That's what the draft plans will reflect. They'll be out by the end of October. At that point we will have much more technical and specific engagements with specific communities.

"We have fifteen of these range plans to file – three of them are up here. But there is a number across the province. So this is a big piece of work. The fact is that our range plans need to be really, I think, well thought out. They need to have a good socio-economic analysis associated with them, which we've committed to doing, and filing that with the federal government. Really, what we want is to take the target off Alberta's back.

"You know there's probably going to be law suits by environmental groups around caribou. So my intention is for that not be happening here in Alberta.

"We know that we can recover this species, while ensuring that we protect jobs and livelihoods and vibrant communities here in the north and elsewhere".