



Reference: 211850

MAR 02 2015

Andrew Weaver, MLA
Oak Bay - Gordon Head
219 – 3930 Shelbourne Street
Victoria, British Columbia
V8P 5P6

Dear Mr. Weaver:

Thank you for your letter of January 19, 2015, regarding the wolf cull in the South Selkirk Mountains and in the South Peace of British Columbia.

The conclusions of Steven Wilson's June 4, 2010, report, "Estimating the Short-term Benefit of Wolf Management to Mountain Caribou Herds", remain valid; however, the circumstances of the South Selkirk herd have changed. Between 2009 and 2014 the caribou population declined from 46 caribou to 18. Prior to this, from 2004 to 2009 the South Selkirk population was increasing. During this time only a few transient wolves were found in surveys. In 2008, regional staff began receiving reports of an increased number of wolves in the South Selkirk but the impact on caribou was not immediately realized.

Wilson's report states "The southernmost herds (South Selkirks and Purcell South) benefit the least from wolf reductions because wolves are not responsible for a significant proportion of caribou mortality in these areas." This statement is no longer the case - the most recent confirmed mortalities on the South Selkirk herd are due to wolf predation. While cougars are another significant predator on caribou in southern British Columbia, the region has taken measures to address cougar predation. Unlike wolves, hunting pressure can reduce cougar numbers and predation pressure. Changes in bag limits and hunting seasons in the Management Units adjacent to the South Selkirk herd should reduce cougar predation risk and compliment wolf control measures.

The report also notes that other management measures are necessary to ensure that wolf control is effective. In addition to predator control, approximately 108 000 ha of caribou habitat is protected in British Columbia's portion of the South Selkirk's, as no further timber harvesting occurs. This includes: 67 000 ha in no harvest Ungulate Winter Range, for caribou; 13 600 ha in provincial parks (West Arm and Stagleap Provincial Parks) and 27 500 ha in the Darkwoods Property. There is additional habitat protected in Idaho and Washington states.

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Disturbance from winter recreation is also being reduced. A significant portion of South Selkirk core caribou habitat has been closed to snowmobile use (approximately 61 000 ha). A moratorium is in place for new commercial winter recreation tenures.

While the report observes that small herds benefit least from wolf control, the dire situation of the South Selkirk herd requires us to take all measures to conserve the herd. Hunting or trapping to reduce wolf numbers has been ineffective. Helicopter shooting is required to achieve the minimum 80 percent removal of a pack to enable caribou recovery. Aerial removal continues to be viewed as a short term measure. If the herd begins to reverse its recent sharp decline and persists to benefit from the habitat protection and other management measures, aerial wolf removal will be reassessed.

The government's 2008 "Interim Strategy for Predator/Prey Management Actions in Support of Mountain Caribou Recovery" notes that the ultimate cause for decline is habitat loss. As mentioned above, the majority of the key winter habitat has been protected by parks, legislative orders or private conservation lands. Although habitat protection and natural recovery of logged areas could provide an incremental contribution to caribou recovery, unless predation is controlled, there is a high risk caribou will be lost before they can benefit from those contributions. We are well advanced on addressing the ultimate solution but need wolf control to address proximal issues.

The 2005 Mountain Caribou Science Team report notes that predator management is a measure to be taken in conjunction with other management options. Several measures, noted above, have been deployed in the South Selkirk herd area. Under the guidance of the Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan, other innovative projects have been tested that could be deployed for the South Selkirk herd in the future.

- An augmentation project was undertaken at the nearby Purcells-South herd. The results were not anticipated (i.e. most of the transplanted caribou died within 1 year) but much was learned from the project.
- A pilot project to examine the feasibility of limiting wolf predation by sterilizing or removing wolves was undertaken in the Quesnel Highlands near Quesnel. While there was evidence of reduced wolf density and some indications of reduced predation, the project was expensive to apply and required specialized skills that were difficult to acquire.
- A moose reduction project is underway near Revelstoke. The objective is to reduce the primary prey of wolves (moose) by hunting to reduce wolf density near caribou herds. This project is still being examined, but it has reduced moose and wolves, appears to have stopped the decline in caribou and possibly is enabling recovery.
- Also near Revelstoke, the first year of a maternal penning project was completed. The primary objective is to reduce bear predation on calves, but there are benefits to both cows and calves in protection from all predators. Assessment to date suggests the method has increased calf survival in the first four to five months of life. Winter caribou surveys will provide information to enable a more complete assessment of the method.

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Each of these projects is being undertaken as a trial or passive adaptive management experiment. The rigor of control groups and large sample size is difficult to achieve in large scale projects in the wild. The projects attempted to compare results to nearby "untreated" herds. Monitoring is a major component of the projects. Results are given close scrutiny by scientific staff. Some of the results form the basis for academic study. We are trying to garner as much information and insight possible from the various, pilot projects underway and adjust the plans as appropriate. As we gain confidence in the results, these trial methods can become operational.

Attached is a table that lists the most recent population information for mountain caribou herds and our trend assessment. The current estimated population of mountain caribou is 1520. The current inventory schedule calls for a survey of each herd every 3 years. The exception is where management is being focussed on a herd and surveys may occur more frequently. The recovery goal of 2500 caribou by 2027 was predicated on pulling each of the management levers (e.g. habitat protection, augmentation, predator and prey management) strongly and consistently.

This ministry has made significant advances on habitat protection, maternal penning, managing primary prey, and limiting winter disturbance. This ministry is now turning to aggressive predator removal and remains optimistic that it can make meaningful recovery for mountain caribou if we continue to implement the full management regime.

The operational plans for both the Selkirk's and South Peace were peer-reviewed by Dave Hervieux, Co-Chair of the West Central Alberta Caribou Standing Committee and Dr. Stan Boutin of the University of Alberta and the Alberta Biodiversity Conservation Chair. Attached is the review of "Experimental Wolf Reduction to Enhance the Recovery of the Threatened Quintette Caribou Herd in the South Peace and South Selkirk Mountain Caribou Wolf Management Plan" by Dr. Stan Boutin and the review by Dave Hervieux.

Undertaking wildlife management is not done without careful consideration. I feel this ministry has taken many management actions to support recovery of caribou within British Columbia without short term success. As such, it became necessary to implement this tool to address the urgent needs of the South Selkirk herd. Like some of the other management tools, this ministry is aware there is a risk it will not achieve the objective and we are prepared to monitor the results and adjust as is necessary. This includes suspending wolf removal if it is not achieving the performance measure of a 10 percent increase in caribou annually.

Thank you, again, for writing and expressing your concerns regarding the wolf cull in the South Selkirk Mountains and in the South Peace of British Columbia.

Sincerely,



Steve Thomson
Minister

Andrew Weaver, MLA

Attachments: Experimental Wolf Reduction to Enhance the Recovery of the Threatened Quintette Caribou Herd in the South Peace and South Selkirk Mountain Caribou Wolf Management Plan – Dave Hervieux – April 3, 2014

Review of: Experimental Wolf Reduction to Enhance the Recovery of the Threatened Quintette Caribou Herd in the South Peace and South Selkirk Mountain Caribou Wolf Management Plan – Dr. Stan Boutin - October 7, 2014

Mountain Caribou Population Trends