

Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan Progress Board

Annual Report on Activities and Accomplishments of the Mountain Caribou Recovery 2013-14

Prepared by:
Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan
Progress Board
October, 2014

Background

On October 16, 2007, government announced the Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan (MCRIP), developed in consultation with and supported by the forest industry, commercial and public recreation sectors, environmental sector representatives, and First Nations. The goal of the MCRIP is to halt the decline of the mountain caribou population within seven years for each planning unit and to recover mountain caribou to 1995 population levels (2500 animals) across the mountain caribou range within 20 years in those planning units with more than 10 animals.

One of the management actions within the MCRIP was to institute a cross-sector progress board to monitor the effectiveness of recovery actions. The Progress Board meets annually to provide comments and recommendations on government delivery of actions necessary to achieve government's MCRIP recovery objectives.

The Progress Board met August 22, 2014 via conference call for a briefing on MCRIP management activities undertaken in 2013/14. A copy of the briefing report is attached. The meeting was attended by Archie MacDonald (Council of Forest Industries), Joe Scott (Mountain Caribou Project), Trish Drinkle (BC Snowmobile Federation), Pierre Dion (BC Snowmobile Federation), Donegal Wilson (BC Snowmobile Federation), Jim Hackett (Interior Lumber Manufacturer's Association), Wilf Pfleiderer (BC Wildlife Federation), Dave Butler (Heli-Cat Canada) and David Moore (Heli-Cat Canada). The call was also attended by MCRIP staff, including Steve Gordon, Darcy Peel (currently representing Environment Canada while on Interchange) and Chris Ritchie. This report summarizes comments and recommendations from the Progress Board at the meeting on August 22, 2014.

A recurring theme in discussion of activities conducted in 2013/14 was to take a more herd-specific view in determining management needs and possible solutions. Also, prior to deploying a tool that has shown some promise at contributing to the MCRIP recovery goals, to closely examine the scientific information and advice to increase confidence such actions will provide similar benefit in other areas.

RECOVERY ACTION #1: PROTECT 2.2 MILLION HECTARES OF MOUNTAIN CARIBOU RANGE FROM LOGGING AND ROAD BUILDING

Since 2007, approximately 2.2 million ha of caribou habitat has been protected from logging and road building. Guidelines have been developed to manage impacts to habitat from mineral exploration and helicopter and snow-cat skiing infrastructure activities. There has been limited activity on habitat protection in 2013/14. However, discussion has been initiated with the Forest Practices Board to examine the amount of tree removal that has occurred in areas designated for legal caribou habitat protection (i.e. Ungulate Winter Range or Wildlife Habitat Areas)

Comments from Progress Board: The Progress Board expressed an interest in seeing the results of the examination prior to final editing.

PROGRESS BOARD RECOMMENDATION:

1. Progress Board was generally satisfied with activity in this area.

RECOVERY ACTION #2: MANAGE HUMAN RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Since 2007, approximately 1.0 million ha of caribou habitat has been excluded from recreational snowmobile use. Stewardship Management Agreements (SMAs) have been signed with snowmobile clubs in 3 regions. The SMA for areas in the Cariboo Region expired in 2013 and was to be renewed. SMAs in the Thompson Region expire in 2014 and will be reviewed and renewed with possible revisions. A compliance monitoring and enforcement program for areas closed to recreational snowmobile use continues. MOUs have been signed with major heli- and cat-ski operators to ensure data and monitoring results are submitted to government. There is a moratorium on new commercial recreation tenures.

Public Recreation

Comments from Progress Board: Providing effective communication should be continued, including outreach to snowmobilers living in Alberta. Compliance monitoring and enforcement needs to continue. The monitoring protocol needs to account for authorized sledding tracks (e.g., trapline trails). Accountability for closure contravention needs to be applied to the actual offending parties. Situations where areas are closed to snowmobile use but available for logging are an on-going concern that needs to be resolved.

PROGRESS BOARD RECOMMENDATION:

1. MCRIP should continue to share the results of patrols including evidence of non-compliance with clubs and associations. An effort should be made to improve the “quantification” of monitoring results to permit a more accurate description of problem

areas (e.g. omit permitted users like trappers) and to enable trend assessment in the future.

2. Continue work to resolve circumstances where caribou habitat is closed to sledding but remains available to logging.
3. A method should be developed to periodically examine areas closed for recreational snowmobile use to assess use by caribou and the value of closures in meeting MCRIP recovery goals.

Commercial Recreation

Comments from Progress Board: Results from the third-party compliance audit is of keen interest to Progress Board members.

Progress Board Recommendation:

1. Continue work on the third party audit

RECOVERY ACTION #3: MANAGE PREDATOR POPULATIONS

Since 2007, trapping and hunting season on wolves and cougar have been modified to encourage removing these predators near caribou habitat. Wolves are monitored using aerial surveys or radio telemetry to assess pack home ranges. The University of Victoria graduate student will defend her thesis on predation risk project in the fall

Comments from Progress Board: Any predator management initiatives need to be informed by an examination of local predator-prey relationships. This includes the influence of Ungulate Winter Ranges to increase alternate prey (e.g. moose) and predator selectivity for certain prey. Limiting management to only predators will likely result in a “band-aid” solution.

PROGRESS BOARD RECOMMENDATION:

1. Continue examination of predator management options and likely effectiveness. Implement predator management project where science indicates that predator removal is necessary to achieve caribou recovery goals.

RECOVERY ACTION #4: MANAGE THE PRIMARY PREY OF CARIBOU PREDATORS

Since 2007, 2 projects have been initiated to determine if modified hunting of moose can result in reduced wolf density and, in turn predation on caribou. The Revelstoke Alternate Prey pilot project continues to monitor 3 caribou herds (Columbia North, Frisby Boulder, South Columbia) as well as moose recruitment and wolf populations in the study area. Based on 2013 results,

caribou numbers are up in the Columbia North herd, and are unchanged in the Frisby Boulder and Columbia South herds. Lake Revelstoke moose population and wolf numbers are both low.

Comments from Progress Board: More communication is needed on this component of the MCRIP. White-tailed deer numbers appear to be up in many areas of the province, which may influence predator numbers. Alternately, moose numbers are down in places. These factors should be included in any decisions to expand use of alternate prey management. Areas with “naturally” low moose numbers may be good candidate areas to measure responses in wolf or caribou numbers.

PROGRESS BOARD RECOMMENDATION:

1. Continue to monitor the results of these projects and report the results to the Progress Board. Prior to application to other areas of mountain caribou range, ensure this method has strong technical support and confidence it will be effective.

RECOVERY ACTION #5: BOOST CARIBOU NUMBERS IN THREATENED HERDS

Since 2007, several potential augmentation tools have started testing. A transplant to the Purcells South herd occurred in 2012. A maternal penning trial is being implemented near Revelstoke. An MOU has been signed with Parks Canada and the Calgary Zoo to develop captive breeding capacity.

Comments from Progress Board; The Progress Board support for more augmentation of the Purcells South herd is conditional on receiving a strong independent evaluation supporting the second phase of the Purcells South augmentation project. Captive breeding is worth investigating to determine its value for mountain caribou recovery in BC.

PROGRESS BOARD RECOMMENDATION:

1. MCRIP staff should complete an independent review to confirm the likelihood of success before undertaking the second phase of the Purcell South transplant. Progress Board wants to see the results of the assessment and provide advice or recommendations to government on the project.
2. Continue investigating the operational limitations and benefits of captive breeding.

RECOVERY ACTION #6: SUPPORT ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT AND RESEARCH AND IMPLEMENT EFFECTIVE MONITORING PLANS

Since 2007, adaptive management projects have been conducted to test caribou use of designated habitat.

PROGRESS BOARD RECOMMENDATION:

1. Progress Board was generally satisfied with activity in this area.

RECOVERY ACTION #7: INSTITUTE A CROSS-SECTOR PROGRESS BOARD TO MONITOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RECOVERY ACTIONS

In 2007, a review board of stakeholders was established to review government progress on the MCRIP. The group meets periodically by phone or face to face meetings to discuss operational matters related to mountain caribou recovery. The Progress Board also holds an annual meeting to conduct a review of the previous year's work and to prepare and file a report to government.

Comments from Progress Board: Progress Board members feel that communication between MCRIP staff and members could be more frequent. Members would like to see reports on projects undertaken by MCRIP. The meeting involving all stakeholder groups is valuable to enable information sharing and collaborative work.

PROGRESS BOARD RECOMMENDATION:

1. MCRIP staff should make technical reports on MCRIP projects available to Progress Board members as soon as possible. This will allow members to more effectively comment on work intended to achieve the MCRIP goals and to distribute information to their constituency.
2. Progress Board should meet quarterly (meeting or phone) for information sharing, updates on projects and discussion.