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Open Letter from Scientists and Scholars about the Little Smoky Caribou Range Plan

September 28, 2016

The Honourable Rachel Notley, Premier
Government of Alberta
premier@gov.ab.ca

This letter is to request your action to end a planned predator and competitor cull in the Little Smoky region as part of efforts to protect caribou in the area. The Alberta Boreal Woodland Caribou Range Management Plan calls for the death of wolves, bears, cougars and ungulates such as moose, deer and elk. Although we appreciate the effort to meet a federal commitment to protect caribou in the Little Smoky region, we believe the project will have negative long-term consequences for bio-diversity in the area and will, ultimately, not work to improve health of the caribou herd. There is an alternative that does not require the slaughter of other animals and we ask that you act to stop the planned cull and consider other options.

The government's current plan proposes to fence a 100 km² area in the Little Smoky region of western Alberta to farm caribou for the next 50 years. Caribou calves produced within this enclosure will be released in predator-free areas. To meet the recovery program of the Government of Canada, and to reduce landscape fragmentation to less than 65% of the overall area, some seismic lines will be restored to natural habitat, mainly to reduce access.

Removing predators and ungulates to favour the production of caribou will compromise biodiversity in the whole region and will have cascading ecological consequences on adjacent wildlife communities. Furthermore, releasing caribou raised in the absence of predators means they will be less sensitive to natural danger cues and unfit to perpetuate the caribou population. Data show previous predator culls in the area have not met their goals. From 2005 to 2012, 1000 wolves and several cougars, wolverines and other predators have been killed, but the caribou population has not grown.

Most compelling, a late-winter study habitat study in the Little Smoky area showed that wolves did not hunt in caribou habitats, instead preferring upland habitats inhabited by moose and deer. It also showed that survival of the caribou population depended on establishing priority management zones where functional habitat would be protected from further disturbance, an initiative that could be implemented without totally compromising industrial activities in the area.

While the proposed government's fencing program will cost hundreds of millions of dollars to implement and maintain over the next 50 years, a scientifically sound alternative program could be executed for a fraction of the cost and would produce positive caribou population growth within a decade (please see attached Figure 1). Such a program is estimated to cost less than \$2 million over the next five years, and will address the fundamental factor in the conservation of the Little Smoky caribou population - habitat loss and fragmentation. This alternative program will protect and reconnect vital muskeg habitat while maintaining industrial activity. With proper habitat management, and an increased supply of food and protective cover, the Little Smoky caribou population will have the opportunity to survive and grow.

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As biologists with extensive experience in wildlife conservation and management, and success in implementing effective, similar programs in other regions, we sincerely hope your office will seriously consider our alternative program.

We would be pleased to meet with anyone in your office for further discussion.

Regards,

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Figure 1: Proposed Little Smoky caribou 5-year management program.

