

Fort Nelson First Nation releases Medzih Action Plan to Prevent Loss of Boreal Caribou in BC

October 4, 2017 - Fort Nelson, BC - Fort Nelson First Nation (FNFN) has released a Medzih (boreal caribou) Action Plan to address the emergency conditions that have led to the rapid decline of this culturally important animal in BC. The Medzih Action Plan (MAP) delivers recovery actions for boreal caribou habitat within the Liard watershed in northeastern British Columbia.

The MAP is the first, and so far only, recovery plan in BC to spatially identify and protect critical habitat for boreal caribou, a critically imperiled and iconic species that once occurred in large numbers in FNFN's territory.

FNFN has written the MAP to address the ongoing failure by both the province of BC and the federal government to take the steps necessary for boreal caribou recovery. Despite federal requirements for BC to prevent destruction of at least 65% of habitat within identified ranges, BC's boreal caribou implementation plans only provide weak protection for critical habitat and do not prevent ongoing disturbance. As a result, over the last five years, more industrial development has been approved in these areas, more habitat has been degraded, and boreal caribou populations have now declined to precariously low levels, to the extent that FNFN members no longer exercise their constitutionally-protected Treaty right to hunt this species for subsistence purposes.

"Over 80% of boreal caribou habitat in BC is in FNFN's territory. FNFN has a strong interest in helping to restore caribou populations," says Katherine Capot-Blanc, Acting Lands Director of the FNFN Lands Department. "Since 2011 we have repeatedly attempted to engage with government about our concerns with the boreal caribou population but have not received any substantive response. Our approach is to be proactive and work with government—but government has not been receptive. That's why we have taken this step."

The Medzih Action Plan has three goals:

- Recover boreal caribou populations in the Liard watershed to self-sustaining levels;
- Allow FNFN to exercise its Treaty right to subsistence hunting of caribou;

- Allow compatible industrial development in areas that are less critical to boreal caribou.

FNFN Chief Dickie: “FNFN fully supports natural resource development but not at the cost to one of our traditionally harvested species, boreal caribou. It’s been left up to us to develop a proactive plan to help restore the caribou population before it’s too late, and before any more of our valuable harvesting species are put at risk.”

“The difference between FNFN’s plan and other plans is that we have identified and mapped protection and restoration areas for caribou. The province has consistently avoided mapping a spatial commitment to protection for boreal caribou, and the result has been a long, downward trend for habitat and for caribou alike. Implementation of this plan has the potential to reverse this trend and will meet federal requirements outlined in SARA,” says Dr. Rachel Holt, lead technical author of the plan.

In addition to habitat protection and restoration, the Medzih Action Plan also proposes a number of other strategies, including establishing a fund to pay for active restoration of impacted habitat, looking for ways to promote gas and forestry development in less critical areas for caribou, and developing an approach to industrial development that also provides sustainable jobs. FNFN aims to meet these goals by convening a forum for collaborative action with other governments and industry.

FNFN looks forward to working with our partners in the federal, provincial and municipal governments, as well as industrial partners, to refine and implement the Medzih Action Plan.

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FNFN’s Medzih Action Plan and a technical backgrounder explaining why the MAP is necessary are available to download from FNFN’s website:

<http://www.fortnelsonfirstnation.org/news.html>