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Northwest Conservationists Seek Balance in Caribou Habitat
Judge Rules to Keep Snowmobiles Out of Recovery Area

PRIEST LAKE – U.S. District Court Judge Robert Whaley for the Eastern District Court of Washington gave the very rare Selkirk caribou a little more breathing room today, ruling that snowmobiles would be prohibited from the last remaining winter habitat where caribou are found in the lower-48 states.

Conservationists applauded the decision, calling it a victory for wildlife and people alike.

“As we’ve said all along, the Forest Service needs to balance the needs of rare wildlife with the growing snowmobile use in the high country of the Selkirk Mountains in North Idaho,” said Jonathan Oppenheimer with the Idaho Conservation League. “This land is part of what makes North Idaho special for people and animals alike.”

Conservationists took the Forest Service to court last year, saying the agency failed to address the needs of the woodland caribou as it manages winter recreation. With only about 40 caribou in the Selkirk Herd, the caribou are poised on the edge of extinction and managed under the Endangered Species Act. Like elk and other wildlife, caribou are particularly vulnerable in the winter, when animals are stressed by cold weather and deep snows.

“We had hoped the Forest Service and snowmobilers would agree to avoid key caribou habitat and travel corridors since caribou only inhabit 10% of the entire Forest. Instead we had to rely on a court to intervene,” said Suzanne Asha Stone, northern Rockies representative for Defenders of Wildlife in Boise. “Our actions today will help to ensure these unique animals remain part of Idaho’s natural heritage for future generations.”

In particular, conservationists asked that snowmobile trails and play areas in the caribou’s last habitat, called the “recovery area,” be closed until a comprehensive winter recreation plan that includes the needs of caribou, is developed. Some 90% percent of the Idaho Panhandle National Forest is outside the recovery zone and would not be impacted by this case.

“Uncontrolled motorized recreation is jeopardizing the continued survival of these rare animals,” said Mark Sprengel Executive Director of the Selkirk Conservation Alliance in Priest River.

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"It's clear that the Court agreed with wildlife experts who testified that continued snowmobiling in caribou habitat was having unacceptable impacts. At the same time, I'm confident that as reasonable human beings we can come up with a solution that is satisfactory for caribou and snowmobilers alike. In the final analysis caribou won't recover without broad support from all of us," said Joe Scott, International Programs Director for Conservation Northwest in Bellingham.

Plaintiff groups involved in the litigation include the Selkirk Conservation Alliance, Idaho Conservation League, The Lands Council, Conservation Northwest, Defenders of Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity

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