



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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First Nation takes BC to Court to protect the last 11 Caribou from Coal Mining

VICTORIA – This morning Chief Roland Willson and the entire Council of the West Moberly First Nations will walk into the Courthouse in Victoria, BC to ask the BC Supreme Court to overturn mining permits in the critical habitat of an endangered caribou herd. The hearing is expected to last until Friday.

West Moberly First Nations are based 34kms north of Chetwynd in northeast BC. Last September the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources (MEMPR) issued mining permits to First Coal Corporation (FCC) in the middle of the habitat of the critically endangered Burnt Pine caribou herd – a herd so small that development pressures has reduced to 11 animals. The First Nation turned to the Victoria-based law-firm of Devlin Gailus for legal help, and convinced an environmental organization, West Coast Environmental Law, to assist with funding for the court challenge.

“These caribou and their habitat are integral to the overall biodiversity of the area, and to who we are as Mountain Dunne-za people,” said Chief Roland Willson. “As stewards of the land, we cannot in good conscience stand by and watch MEMPR and FCC place the very existence of this caribou herd in serious jeopardy. Our Elders and the government scientists all agree that coal mining in the caribou’s critical habitat places the herd at risk. The double standard that the mining industry enjoys must come to an end if we are going to save caribou from extinction.”

Dr. Dale Seip, a Wildlife Ecologist from the Ministry of Forests and Range and the government’s top caribou expert, has stated that the caribou herd is “critically endangered” and any further activities by FCC would be “incompatible with the recovery of the Herd”. In addition, scientists from the Ministry of Environment have recommended that “no” activities occur in the critical habitat as there are already signs of the caribou being “extirpated”. MEMPR issued the permits notwithstanding these concerns.

“These caribou are listed as a “threatened species” and are supposed to be legally protected from harmful activities,” said Andrew Gage, a staff lawyer with West Coast Environmental Law. “It’s wrong for the government to refuse to develop and implement a recovery strategy, and West Coast is proud to support the West Moberly First Nations in their legal challenge to the permits.”

Funding for the court case comes from West Coast’s Environmental Dispute Resolution Fund, which is celebrating its 20th Anniversary in Victoria (at 2994 Douglas St.) on Saturday (from 2-4), the day after the hearing is scheduled to wrap up.

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