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## Groups want snowmobiles barred from caribou habitat Suit seeks protection of three known remaining animals in U.S.

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The backcountry's not big enough for both caribou and snowmobiles, according to a lawsuit being filed today in federal court in Spokane that seeks to restrict snowmobile access on 450,000 acres of high-elevation forest, much of it near Priest Lake, Idaho.

At last count, there were only three mountain caribou living in the temperate rain forests of far northern Idaho, making them the most endangered mammal in the United States, according to a copy of the lawsuit. About 30 other caribou in the herd, however, live just north of the border.

Caribou are shy and increasing snowmobile use in their winter feeding and calving areas is killing any chance of a recovery, said Mark Sprengel, executive director of the Priest Lake-based Selkirk Conservation Alliance. "Snowmobiles are just running amok all over the recovery area. These animals need to be left alone and allowed to recover."

The 30-page lawsuit not only accuses the government of failing to protect caribou, but also ignoring its own science and actually "promoting winter snowmobile recreation throughout caribou winter habitat." The groups do not specify actual acreage amounts that should be declared off-limits to snowmobiles, but Sprengel said it would

need to be a "fairly significant" portion of the 450,000-acre recovery zone.

Along with the Selkirk Conservation Alliance, plaintiffs in the lawsuit include the Idaho Conservation League, the Center for Biological Diversity, Advocates for the West, Conservation Northwest, Lands Council and Defenders of Wildlife.

Federal agencies acknowledge snowmobiles are not friends of caribou, but they insist the picture is more complicated. Cougars and logging have also played major roles in preventing a recovery, said Dave O'Brien, spokesman for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

"The science is not conclusive," O'Brien said. "There isn't a large herd in the area. That leaves it open to speculation as to why. Snowmobiles? Habitat? Predators? You hate to make management restrictions without solid science to back it up."

Nearly 15,000 acres of caribou range on the Selkirk Crest already are off-limits to snowmobiles. The prospect of banning snowmobiles on tens of thousands of additional acres could be devastating to the region's winter tourism economy, which is largely based on snowmobiles, said Ingo Schiller, treasurer of the Priest Lake Trails and Snowmobile Club.

"They're going to make people mad,"

Schiller said of the environmental groups behind the lawsuit. "Caribou – how often do you see those? Once in a lifetime?"

Conservationists have been meeting with the Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the better part of a decade hoping to avoid a costly court battle, but in recent years there has been a growing number of snowmobile tracks spotted in caribou habitat, including the closed winter refuge, said Jonathan Oppenheimer, with the Idaho Conservation League. "Those meetings appeared to have fallen on deaf ears. We were boxed into a corner."

Mountain caribou once roamed vast stretches of temperate rain forest, from northern British Columbia to Idaho's Clearwater River region. But as the old-growth forests were cut, the caribou herds became smaller. In 1983, mountain caribou were listed as endangered.

By 1997, there were an estimated 2,400 animals, nearly all in British Columbia. Today, the total herd size is thought to be 1,670 caribou, according to the lawsuit. The Stagleap herd, the last to inhabit the lower 48 states, included 34 caribou, according to the most recent aerial census, taken in late winter. Three members of the herd live in Idaho.

Although continued habitat loss remains a large threat, ending harassment by snowmobiles would probably offer the quickest relief for caribou, Sprengel said. A 2001 report from the Fish and Wildlife

Service noted that "growing recreation pressure" posed a threat to caribou. Last year, a Forest Service report also pointed out snowmobile use "causes displacement in most cases" of caribou from their winter feeding and calving areas. More powerful, lighter snowmobiles are also allowing riders to penetrate deeper into remote habitat, Sprengel said.

"We have an extremely strong case," he said. "We're going to present the agency's own documents."

Despite weighing upward of 400 pounds, caribou are able to traverse deep mountain snowfields thanks to hooves that can expand to the size of dinner plates. Snowmobiles not only scare the shy animals, but they leave behind compacted trails for deer, which attract predatory cougars, Sprengel said.

The Forest Service has been trying to boost enforcement in recent years to keep winter recreationists out of caribou territory, said O'Brien, the agency's spokesman in Coeur d'Alene. "There's been considerable progress made," he said.

The Forest Service is also currently revising its long-term management plan for the region's forests. Additional protections for caribou could be part of the plan, which is expected to be unveiled next year.

Idaho Fish and Game biologist Wayne Wakkinen said snowmobilers appear to be respecting the boundaries of closures in the Harrison and Beehive lakes areas. Pinpointing additional areas for closure, as well as enforcing these restrictions, could be troublesome for law officers and confusing for snowmobilers, Wakkinen said.

"There's probably other factors that have resulted in the decline of caribou that are more important than snowmobiles at this time," Wakkinen said. "I hate to see people focus exclusively on snowmobiles. That's part of the issue, not all."

Environmental groups say with so few animals left, quick action is needed.

"Caribou are backed into a pretty small corner of the world. If there's any question, they must be given the benefit of the doubt," said Joe Scott, with Conservation Northwest. "The Forest Service is playing fast and loose with the needs of this animal."

Although "caribou" is becoming a dirty word among some snowmobilers and business owners, Ken Barrett, owner and chief guide of Sandpoint-based Selkirk Powder Co., said he supports the idea of additional restrictions. He said his snowmobile and backcountry ski clients are often drawn to the wilds of North Idaho because it remains some of the most pristine terrain in the lower 48 states. The recovery zone is located above 4,000 feet in Idaho and 4,500 feet in Washington.

"It's fine with me," Barrett said. "There is plenty of room to go to other areas outside the recovery zone. There is just this lone herd left there. You can snowmobile anywhere."