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Lawsuit filed to help endangered caribou

by **Nicholas K. Geranios**
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SPOKANE Only a handful of endangered caribou remain in the remote Selkirk Mountains near the Canadian border, and a federal-court lawsuit filed yesterday seeks to ban snowmobiles from their winter range.

The lawsuit filed here would limit snowmobile access on 450,000 acres of high-elevation forest in a sliver of Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho near the snowmobiling hot spot of Priest Lake, Idaho.

The lawsuit said only three mountain caribou were seen in the area this year, though about 30 live on the Canadian side of the border.

"It is the most endangered mammal in the United States," said Mark Sprengel, executive director of the Selkirk Conservation Alliance, which brought the lawsuit.

The lawsuit contends the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service have failed to take adequate steps to save the caribou, which has been listed as endangered since 1983.

"When you have an animal that endangered, the agencies should be falling all over themselves giving the benefit of the doubt to the animal," Sprengel said. "They have declined to do that."

Dave O'Brien, spokesman for the Idaho

Panhandle National Forests, said the lawsuit will put an end to efforts to broker an agreement with snowmobilers, environmental groups and regulators.

The problem is that no one knows why caribou numbers have not recovered, and it is premature to blame snowmobiles, O'Brien said. Predators and logging also are likely keeping numbers low, he said.

"We don't like to implement restrictions on historic and traditional uses without really strong science supporting what we doing," O'Brien said.

"Everyone agrees the caribou are not there. No one agrees on why not."

Snowmobiling is a major economic activity in the area, as people take advantage of some 400 miles of groomed trails.

A ban on snowmobiling could cripple winter business at the landmark Hill's Resort on Priest Lake, owner Craig Hill said. He has snowmobiled in the area since the 1970s and has not seen caribou tracks.

"They aren't there, and they haven't been there," Hill contended.

Even though the lawsuit seeks to ban snowmobiles from the most challenging terrain that lures the best riders, Hill worried that people will assume the entire Priest Lake area is off-limits and go elsewhere.

The lawsuit seeks to ban snowmobiles from critical winter feeding and calving

areas but does not specify an acreage amount.

Other plaintiffs in the lawsuit include the Idaho Conservation League, the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), Advocates for the West, Conservation Northwest, the Lands Council and Defenders of Wildlife.

Nearly 15,000 acres of caribou range on the Selkirk crest already are off-limits to snowmobiles. But conservationists contend they are seeing a growing number of snowmobile tracks in caribou habitat.

Mountain caribou used to roam from British Columbia to Idaho's Clearwater River, but logging reduced their habitat.