

Draft SK2 East Range Plan Review Summary

October 2025

Purpose

This document summarizes comments received during the review process for the Draft SK2 East Range Plan (Government of Saskatchewan 2021 a,b), and how the Final SK2 East Range Plan (Government of Saskatchewan, 2025 a,b) was revised to address or incorporate those comments.

Draft SK2 East Range Plan Public Review Comments

The Draft SK2 East Range Plan (Government of Saskatchewan, 2021 a,b) was developed through a process that included planning table meetings with stakeholders and Rightsholders to discuss options and receive input, from June 2019 to October 2021. A draft plan was presented to the planning table in October 2021 and was followed by a 60-day public review period from October 27, 2021, to December 26, 2021. Planning table member reviews were extended until January 13, 2022, to provide additional time for review. Twelve comment submissions were received from the forestry, energy, mining and peat harvesting industries, outfitters, Métis locals, conservation organizations and local municipalities.

The public comments received on the Draft SK2 East Range Plan (2021 a,b) can be organized into four main themes:

- Theme 1: The range plan will restrict land use activities and limit economic development.
- Theme 2: Implementation details are not well-defined.
- Theme 3: Woodland caribou populations and habitat use are not well documented.
- Theme 4: Technical methods, modelling, and forecasting.

Each of these themes and the Government of Saskatchewan response, including changes made to the final range plan related to the comments received, are discussed below.

Theme 1: The range plan will restrict land use activities and limit economic development

Stakeholders shared both broad and specific comments, with the underlying concern that the range plan will restrict land use activities and economic opportunities. Some responses indicated there is an implicit expectation to accept some loss of habitat value to ensure continued economic activity and benefits.

Balancing Woodland Caribou Conservation and Other Interests

The province has a responsibility to manage habitat to ensure caribou are not extirpated from their current provincial range, while also considering other land uses. *The goal of Saskatchewan's range plans is to achieve and maintain a self-sustaining woodland caribou population by managing habitat availability, while acknowledging Traditional land use and allowing for continued economic activity in northern Saskatchewan.*

Saskatchewan's landscape-scale approach to range planning acknowledges that not all areas within woodland caribou range meet biophysical habitat conditions for woodland caribou, as some areas have higher values than others, and that not all areas can be maintained as high value caribou habitat all the time. Maintaining adequate amounts and appropriately configured high and moderate value caribou

habitat in undisturbed and recovering patches, with the spatial pattern shifting over time, emulates boreal forest dynamics and accepts that some level of habitat disturbance is required in some areas to support land use activities. The range plans also acknowledge that reclamation or regeneration of most area-based non-permanent human-disturbances is a regulatory requirement, is ongoing and is successful.

The SK2 East Range Plan supports attaining [Saskatchewan's Growth Plan](#) and the province's [Prairie Resilience](#) natural systems and socio-economic objectives in the following ways:

- Demonstrating sustainability to maintain reputation, public trust, market access and expansion for Saskatchewan products and resources, as identified in *Saskatchewan's Growth Plan*, while reducing the risk of non-tariff trade sanctions on exported Saskatchewan goods.
- Supporting *Prairie Resilience* objectives to maintain natural system functions, enhance sequestration of greenhouse gases through maintenance or restoration of natural landscapes, and resilience related to climate change, flood and drought.
- Minimizing the risk of a federal *Species at Risk Act* intervention in the form of an Emergency Protection Order that could impact continued economic activity in northern Saskatchewan.

Caribou Habitat Management Areas (CHMAs)

To help achieve the goal of Saskatchewan's SK2 (Boreal Plain) range plans, the concept of Caribou Habitat Management Areas (CHMAs) were developed. The CHMAs identify areas within caribou range that are to be managed for different near and mid-term objectives and incorporate both caribou habitat and land use considerations.

Tier 1 CHMAs represent areas with observed historic and current caribou use and contain moderate to high-value habitat with low disturbance. Tier 1 areas represent some of the best examples of remaining large, undisturbed patches of moderate and high value habitat in the Boreal Plain and are therefore important to maintain or recover caribou populations in Saskatchewan's southern boreal forests. Many Tier 1 areas are centered on large peatland complexes with lower forest harvesting interests. The primary objective within Tier 1 CHMAs is maintaining existing habitat conditions, with the preferred strategy being for regulated industry activities to avoid operating in these areas whenever possible (Note: Indigenous, Rights-based harvesting and other recreational activities are not affected).

Tier 2 CHMAs are areas with good caribou habitat potential and current caribou use, but they also have higher levels of habitat disturbance, both natural and human-caused. The primary objective for Tier 2 CHMAs is restoration/recovery. If managed appropriately, these areas will become high value caribou habitat over time. Forest harvesting is being directed to Tier 2 areas in the initial decade of range plan implementation to finish the harvest sequence and to initiate the forest regeneration process.

Tier 3 CHMAs are areas of lower value caribou habitat and represent some of the highest forest harvesting interests in the commercial forest. Tier 3 areas have the highest levels of land use activity and are expected to remain the primary focus of forest harvesting interest for the coming decades. Applying natural forest pattern-based harvesting, maintaining connectivity between Tier 1 and Tier 2 areas, and achieving effective road and post-harvest forest regeneration are all strategies for Tier 3 CHMAs.

Specific Land Use and Economic Considerations Addressed

Revised Tier 1 and Tier 2 CHMA Boundaries

During the plan review, some forest sector stakeholders requested modifications to Tier 1 and Tier 2 CHMAs to allow continued forest industry access in specific locations. In response, some Tier 1 and Tier 2 CHMA boundaries have been revised through collaboration with the forest industry (Figure 1).

Small modifications were made to some Tier 1 boundaries in the southern part of SK2 East, overlapping the Pasquia Porcupine Forest Management Agreement (FMA), with small subtractions in some areas and the expansion of others. Figure 1, Inset Map 2 identifies these changes. Changes to Tier 1 areas accommodated places where road infrastructure had already been developed, and finishing the harvest sequence in the coming years would have longer-term benefits for caribou habitat.

A larger area along the Hanson Lake Road (Hwy 106) in the North East Timber Supply Area (TSA) has been changed from a Tier 1 to a Tier 2 CHMA. This change provides some near-term forest harvesting opportunities that can be accessed from the highway, while maintaining the large Suggi Lowland area to the south as Tier 1. Forestry modelling was updated to project harvest in the new Tier 2 area and is considered as part of the Land Use Scenarios examined in the range plan. In Tier 2, forest harvesting is preferred to occur in the first 20 years of range plan implementation and then limited as forest habitat regenerates. Achieving effective forestry road reclamation and post-harvest regeneration will be key to Tier 2 CHMAs recovering to undisturbed habitat over time.

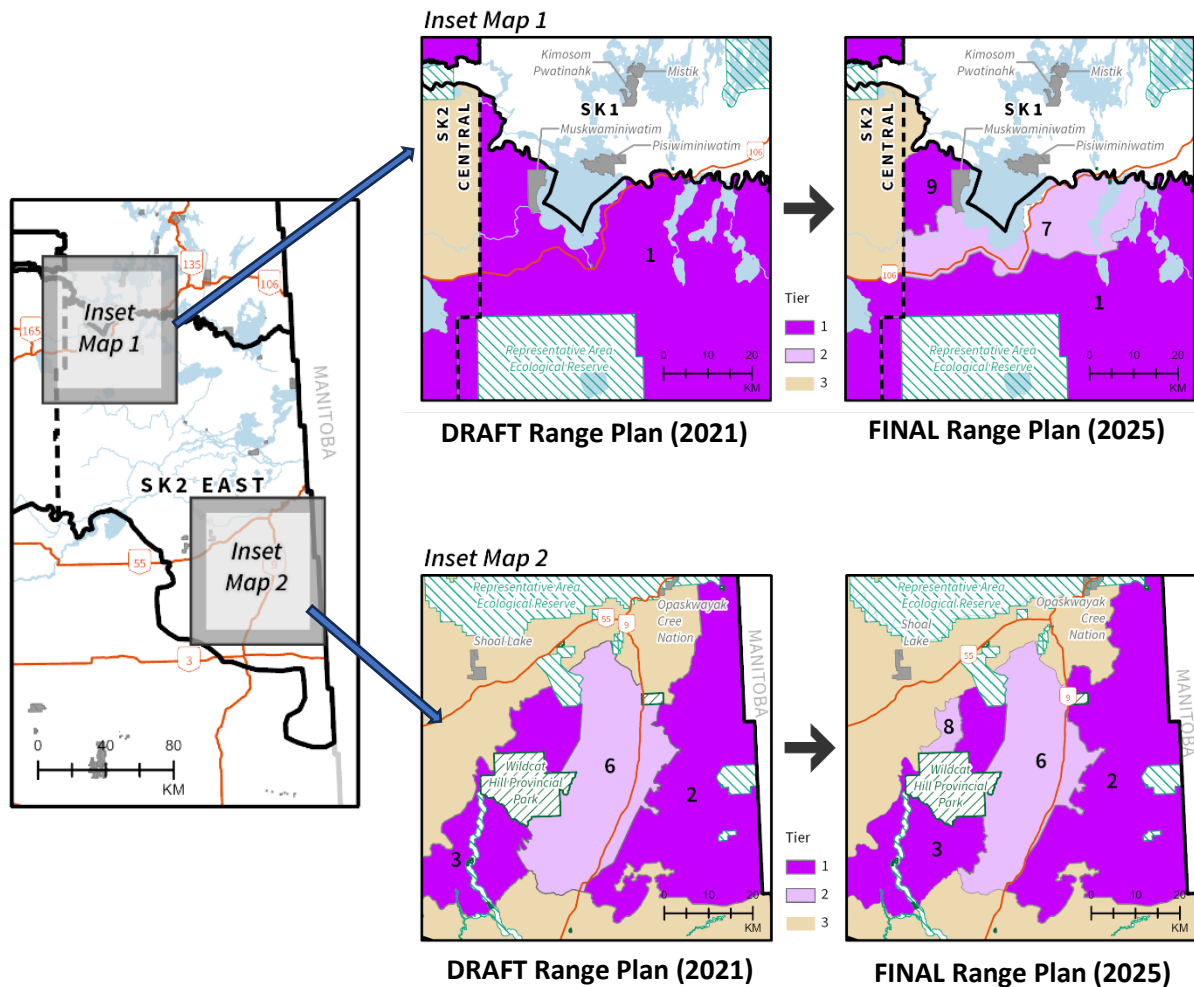


Figure 1. Comparison of CHMA tier boundary revisions between the Draft SK2 East Range Plan (2021a) and Final SK2 East Range Plan (2025a). Inset Map 1 – Hanson Lake Road area. Inset Map 2 – Pasquia Hills and Bog area.

Forest Harvest Scenarios

Assumptions regarding forest harvest scenarios were revised to better reflect observed or projected increases in forest harvest utilization and mill capacity in SK2 East. For Land Use Scenario A, projected forest harvest utilization for the North East TSA increased from seven per cent to 25 per cent, while 80 per cent utilization was maintained for the Pasquia Porcupine TSA. A new land use scenario was then added to explore the potential effects of increasing forest harvest utilization on caribou habitat and total human-caused disturbance. Land Use Scenario B considered a 50 per cent utilization rate for the North East TSA and a 100 per cent forest harvest utilization for the Pasquia Porcupine TSA.

The SK2 East forest harvest scenarios modeled no forest harvesting in Tier 1 CHMAs and Tier 2 CHMA harvest in the initial 20 years of the 50-year scenario period.

Socio-economic Implications of Range Plan Implementation

Many stakeholders identified a desire to understand the potential socio-economic implications of range plan implementation. Specifically, what costs or lost opportunities might industry or other land users incur if the range plan is adopted and implemented?

Conducting such analyses requires very detailed information on socio-economic costs or effects by considering changes to existing management direction that may be introduced by the range plan or resulting from the range plan, versus a status quo situation. Factors could include haul road distances, effects on the Harvest Volume Schedule, or effects on other commercial land users (e.g. outfitters and trappers). The management strategies of the SK2 East Range Plan were developed with consideration of their potential effects on such factors, with the intent to minimize potential impacts to socio-economic values.

While most comments focused on costs or impacts, it should be realized that the range plan provides many benefits for land uses, woodland caribou, other boreal wildlife species, or more broadly forest ecosystem health. These benefits also require full consideration.

The province has conducted an assessment which identified significant challenges to completing a comprehensive socio-economic analysis of SK2 East Range Plan implementation (and other SK2 range plans). The number of factors, the causality between factors, and the detailed information required presents many challenges. If a detailed socio-economic analysis were to be undertaken in the future, it would need to be carefully scoped to examine a reduced number of factors. The resources and time required to iteratively gather the necessary information, with contributions from industry, First Nation and Métis communities and other stakeholders, would be significant.

Summary

A strong economy and biodiversity conservation are not mutually exclusive. Analysis conducted to support the SK2 East Range Plan suggests it will be possible to achieve the range plan landscape management goals while maintaining similar levels of land use activity. However, industrial, recreational and other users of Saskatchewan's northern forests may be required to modify their practices and activities.

Achieving sustainable development is a responsibility shared jointly by Saskatchewan's government, industries, communities, organizations, and residents. The range plans will be reviewed and revised periodically to incorporate new information, or as situations change, providing additional opportunities to consider socio-economic factors. The ministry is committed to continue working with First Nations and Métis, industries, communities, organizations, and residents to meet these joint responsibilities during the implementation of the SK2 East Range Plan.

Theme 2: Implementation details are not well-defined

Some stakeholders expressed the desire to better understand implementation details before being comfortable with the range plan. Specific areas included mitigation and habitat offsets, other regulations and policies, permitting requirements and access management. The ministry acknowledges that these implementation details are required. Since the release of the Draft SK2 East Range Plan in October 2021, considerable progress has been made on range plan implementation topics. The ministry has worked closely with industry and other land users to advance implementation details, initially

focusing on mitigation requirements associated with project permitting and the provincial environmental assessment process. Saskatchewan's forest management planning process provides opportunities to develop and implement customized forest management approaches for different areas of the SK2 (Boreal Plain) Caribou Conservation Unit.

Some stakeholders expressed interest in learning more about the details of Saskatchewan's habitat mitigation framework, its application and related policies and processes. Currently, mitigation offsets are required when a major project within woodland caribou range has been deemed a development under *The Environmental Assessment Act*. Since the draft range plan, specific mitigation offset requirements and methods for their calculation have been advanced and applied to recent projects. The intent of habitat offsets is to address the long-term residual effects of the development after mitigation efforts have been applied. Direct offset costs are the responsibility of the proponent initiating the development, not the regulator.

Some stakeholders sought details about the application of different policies and regulatory instruments. Developing specific policies and instruments is part of the range plan's implementation. The ministry has completed a cross-jurisdictional scan to assist with developing standard mitigation guidelines and conditions for projects, to be applied through the ministry's Crown land permitting processes. Standard mitigation conditions include seasonal operating restrictions to minimize sensory disturbance to caribou during sensitive periods, conditions for new clearing and access, and similar mitigation actions. Guidelines to support habitat reclamation and restoration are also being developed. Reclamation of both active and historical human-caused disturbances is key to stabilizing habitat impacts and improving overall habitat condition over time, as is required to maintain or recover caribou populations. Reclamation plans are an existing requirement of all new developments undergoing environmental assessment.

Some stakeholders expressed concerns about how access management will be addressed, including related policies and processes. While access management is one of the five key strategies identified in the range plan, the ministry recognizes the many challenges associated to achieving effective access management. Because of the many challenges, a blanket access management policy or plan for the entire SK2 (Boreal Plain) is not being pursued at this time. Instead, access management will be addressed in specific locations as part of habitat restoration planning with the input of local land users. Public and stakeholder outreach and education will also be important to increase awareness and build support for access management efforts.

Summary

The SK2 East Range Plan provides broad guidance for managing current woodland caribou habitat and strategies to improve habitat conditions over time. Implementation of the habitat-based range plan strategies will require sustained effort and a long-term view, as the benefits of reclamation, habitat restoration and natural forest harvesting-based strategies will not be realized for many years. Since the SK2 East Range Plan was released in October 2021, the ministry has advanced permitting and environmental assessment mitigation guidelines and standards, offsetting methods for projects undergoing environmental assessments, and has initiated habitat restoration assessments and planning. The range plan implementation actions are being applied consistently across the SK2 (Boreal Plain). The ministry is committed to continue developing practical and effective implementation strategies with stakeholders and Rightsholders.

Theme 3: Woodland caribou populations and habitat use are not well documented

Some stakeholders desired a better understanding of the caribou population and habitat use in the range planning area, specifically in the southern part of SK2 East. While the best available information (historic and current) has been used to assess the SK2 East caribou population and habitat use, recent monitoring efforts have focused on the northern part of the range planning area.

The ministry is responsible for monitoring woodland caribou across the entire Saskatchewan portion of the boreal caribou range (approximately one third of the province). Conducting large scale monitoring studies in all locations concurrently is not possible. Over the past decade, monitoring has been completed in a portion of all Saskatchewan caribou conservation units and administrative units, providing an initial baseline assessment of population size and trend. Ongoing population monitoring projects will occur, with specific locations being determined based on risk, knowledge gaps, and available resources.

In addition to conducting monitoring projects in different areas of woodland caribou range, the ministry annually collects and collates caribou observation data from a variety of sources, further expanding knowledge about caribou occurrence and distribution. The caribou observation database contains a long-term record (decades) of caribou locations in woodland caribou range, including SK2 East. Historical caribou observations are important as they can provide an understanding of distribution changes over time and indicate areas that have and can again provide suitable habitat for caribou.

Some caribou in the southern portion of SK2 East are part of the transboundary Saskatchewan-Manitoba Bog population. Any future population status assessment in this part of SK2 East should therefore be conducted in collaboration with the province of Manitoba.

Summary:

The ministry will continue to collect and enhance woodland caribou population and habitat use data to support and evolve range management decisions. However, given the low density of boreal woodland caribou that is distributed across a very large, forested landscape, monitoring caribou populations is challenging and resource intensive. Large scale monitoring programs cannot be conducted in all areas of the province concurrently. The ministry is developing a longer-term population monitoring strategy to guide methods and future monitoring locations, and would like to explore potential partnerships with industry, First Nation and Métis communities and other interest groups.

Theme 4: Technical methods, modelling and forecasting

Some reviewers suggested changes to technical methods, modelling, and forecasting. Specific requests included changing buffers on human-caused disturbances, excluding/including certain types of disturbance/habitat, calculating disturbance levels using smaller or larger geographic areas, using only Saskatchewan-based research, and using finer-scale data to calculate disturbance levels. Each topic is addressed below.

Calculating Human-caused Disturbance

The Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) boreal woodland caribou recovery strategy (the Recovery Strategy, ECCC 2020) has developed a population viability model that relates the probability of a woodland caribou population to be self-sustaining (i.e. stable) to the proportion of a range affected by

the total amount of natural and human-caused disturbance. Disturbance is defined as wildfires less than 40 years old and human features visible at a 1:50,000 scale buffered by 500m. The ministry has undertaken its technical work, range assessments and scenario modelling and forecasting following the ECCC approach to disturbance calculations. Any changes to how habitat disturbance is measured in the range plan would be inconsistent with how disturbance is measured in the Recovery Strategy and the disturbance-recruitment relationship upon which the federal definition of critical habitat is based. Consequently, any revised measure of habitat disturbance (e.g. applying variable width buffers or other assumptions to human features) could not currently be evaluated against the established 65 per cent (SK2) or 40 per cent (SK1) undisturbed habitat thresholds.

While Saskatchewan will continue measuring habitat disturbance based on Recovery Strategy methodology, vegetation assessments using LiDAR are being conducted on historical linear features in some Tier 2 areas to gain a more accurate understanding of the number of features that are naturally recovering. When linear feature restoration criteria have been identified, this information could be used to model removal of these features at a future date.

Use of Saskatchewan Research and Data

The ministry has and will continue to prioritize Saskatchewan research and data as range plans are developed. While not all relevant research has been conducted locally, it is reasonable to consider work from other jurisdictions where the ecological setting and other components are applicable to Saskatchewan. This is a normal and prudent way to use the best available information when limited resources to conduct original research are available. The most important data, leading to the assessment of population status, comes directly from Saskatchewan through ongoing population monitoring efforts.

Saskatchewan is proposing to include a research component to its new section 11 conservation agreement for woodland caribou and fully intends to work with stakeholders and Rightsholders to identify topics and potential partnerships.

Wildfire Considerations

Some stakeholders were seeking forest harvesting and management activities to be recognized as a management tool to reduce wildfire risk. Other reviewers desired an improved understanding of the value of burned areas to caribou, and the potential for wildfire suppression efforts to be used to protect habitat. Forest management aims to maintain a healthy landscape through natural forest pattern-based harvesting, which may contribute to mitigating wildfire risk at the landscape level. Although forest harvesting can be an important management tool to maintain appropriate forest age class distributions and modify forest fuel types, the potential role of forest harvesting in mitigating landscape-scale wildfire risk requires additional research, and its effectiveness may vary depending on the inherent natural forest patterns and short-term weather conditions.

Wildfires are a natural part of boreal forest ecology. Sustained fire suppression can create fuel buildup, enabling more intense and larger fires. Saskatchewan, like all provinces, does not have unlimited resources to fight all fires and utilizes a system of risk assessment for directing resources during a fire season, with priorities being human life, communities, and essential infrastructure. The province is investigating options for including important caribou habitat in the risk assessment.

Scenario Modelling and Forecasting Future Conditions

Some stakeholders proposed changes to the scenario modelling presented in the range plan, such as including climate change modelling and modelling over longer time frames. Others sought clarity on the relationship between the range plan scenarios and modelling by the forest industry that occurs over a more extended period.

The focus of the range plan is to manage for reduced cumulative disturbance and increased caribou habitat for population recovery. Scenario modelling is used to assist in understanding what management actions could be taken to achieve the desired outcomes, but they are not predictions. Modelling for the range plan was based on the best available information at the time of development, to estimate minimum and maximum disturbance levels under different scenario assumptions. Factoring potential climate change effects into the land use scenario modelling would be challenging, as it requires the consideration of many direct and indirect effects and relationships. Therefore, at this time, potential climate change effects have not been included.

Given Saskatchewan's historical information and anticipated future land uses, any forecasting beyond 50 years results in greater uncertainties in the main assumptions (e.g. harvest level, levels of other industrial development, amount of wildfire disturbance) and, therefore, greater uncertainty in disturbance outcomes. The 50-year land use scenario modelling period was maintained for the final range plan.

Wood supply modelling is conducted to identify sustainable forest harvest levels with Forest Management Planning (FMP) Standard or accepted constraints in place, so is completed for a different purpose than range plan scenario modelling. The FMP Standard "Strategy for Management of Woodland Caribou Habitat" section was recently added to align with range plan guidance. Forest licensees are responsible for the forest estate modelling required to develop their FMP, including developing their caribou strategy. However, the ministry will work collaboratively with and provide guidance to the sector to support exploratory modelling as part of the FMP development process that considers caribou habitat outcomes.

Summary:

The SK2 East Range Plan is supported by land use scenario modelling that examines the effectiveness of different habitat and land use management strategies to reduce human-caused disturbance and maintain or improve caribou habitat conditions over time. While methods to calculate the amount of habitat disturbance follow the federal Recovery Strategy (ECCC, 2020), Saskatchewan-developed methods and information have been used to forecast future conditions. In the future, as the Recovery Strategy is updated, or new information or technical methods are developed, changes to the range plan modelling and forecasting approaches and methods can be expected.

References

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