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PRESS RELEASE

Planning Participants Must Sign Confidentiality Agreement To Obtain Copy of Final Implementation Plan for Saving Mountain Caribou

The public process on a recovery plan for the endangered mountain caribou isn't public anymore. The BC government is forcing people to sign a confidentiality agreement in order to obtain a copy of the final draft implementation plan. Valhalla Wilderness Society (VWS) director Craig Pettitt received a tip about the plan and called Mark Zacharias, the head of BC's Species at Risk Coordination Office (SARCO). Zacharias said the plan was released approximately a month ago. "I requested a copy," says Pettitt, who sat at one of the recovery tables for two years and has made several presentations and written submissions to SARCO. "Mr. Zacharias said I would first have to meet with him and SARCO representative Pat Field next week to determine whether we could have a copy, and that VWS would have to sign a confidentiality agreement."

Pettitt was told that the document is "Cabinet secure" — it has been sent to Cabinet and is now confidential; however he was also told that the document is "still under discussion". "Any document that is still under discussion can be amended, and that means it's still a draft," says Pettitt. "The story I heard was that there are negotiations going on between environmental groups, logging companies and the winter recreation sector. This has been the best-kept secret in the environmental movement. It may even turn out to be the biggest back-room deal we've ever encountered in over 30 years of environmental work, but our access to information has been very limited."

"If environmental groups can't tell their colleagues and the public what they've seen in this report, or share the report, that is a very real clamp on their freedom of speech," says Anne Sherrod, a director of VWS. "The requirement to sign a confidentiality agreement excludes groups that have a strong sense of public rights in matters concerning public resources. People who sign have to be willing to keep the information secret from the media, the public, their colleagues and even their own members, no matter how much bad news it contains for the mountain caribou."

Furthermore, the government has apparently been selective about who was offered an opportunity to sign the agreement. "VWS found out about the release of the plan and the

