

**Summary of the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board's report, entitled "Report on a Public Hearing Held by the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board, 6-8 April 2016, Behchokò, NT & Reasons for Decisions Related to a Joint Proposal for the Management of Bluenose-East ʔekwò (Barren-ground caribou) Herd – PART A"**

The Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board (WRRB) is responsible for wildlife management in Wek'èezhì and shares responsibility for managing and monitoring the Bluenose-East caribou herd. In November 2015, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR), Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) reported that, based on a calving ground photographic survey conducted in June 2015, the Bluenose-East herd had continued to decline significantly. The total number of breeding females had declined from an estimate of 34,472 (95% CI=30,109-38,835) in 2013 to an estimate of 17,396 (95% CI=12,780-22,012) in 2015, a decline of about 29%. The total population estimate fell from 68,295 (95% CI=50,254-86,336) in 2013 to an estimate of 38,592 (95% CI=33,859-43,325) in 2015 – a decline of approximately 43% over two years. Therefore, in their view, ENR felt that further management actions were required.

In December 2015, the Tłıchq Government (TG) and ENR submitted the *Joint Proposal on Management Actions for Bluenose-East Caribou 2016-2019* to the Board, which proposed new restrictions on hunter harvest, predator management and ongoing monitoring. More specifically, TG and ENR proposed implementing a herd-wide total allowable harvest of 950 bulls-only and allocation for the Bluenose-East caribou herd and conducting a feasibility assessment of a full range of wolf management actions. The WRRB considered any specific restriction of harvest or component of harvest as the establishment of a total allowable harvest (TAH). After review and analysis of the proposal, the WRRB complied with Section 12.3.10 of the Tłıchq Agreement and held a public hearing in Behchokò, NT on April 6-8, 2016.

Throughout its proceeding, the Board repeatedly heard from governments, communities and members of the public of their concerns over the continued decrease of the Bluenose-East herd, including recognition of the rapid rate of the decline. Vital rates associated with the herd, including the cow survival rate, calf recruitment, and pregnancy rate, all indicate that the herd is likely to continue to decline in the near future. The WRRB concluded, based on all available Aboriginal and scientific evidence, that a serious conservation concern exists for the Bluenose-East caribou herd and that additional management actions are vital for herd recovery.

However, in order to allow careful consideration of all of the evidence on the record and to meet legislated timelines, the WRRB decided to prepare two separate reports to respond to the proposed management actions in the joint management proposal. This first report, Part A, dealt with the proposed harvest management actions that will require regulation changes in order for new regulations to be in place for the start of the 2016/17 harvest season, as well as the proposed wolf feasibility assessment. The second report, Part B, dealt with additional predator management actions, biological and environmental monitoring, and cumulative effects.

In anticipation of the proposal, the ʔehdzo Got'ıne Gots'ę Nákedı/Sahtú Renewable Resources Board (SRRB) and the WRRB signed a "*Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Collaborative Efforts for the Management of the Bluenose-East Caribou Herd*" in October 2015

to ensure management of proceedings related to the Bluenose-East Ɂekwò herd would be as effective as possible. Each Board conducted its own proceeding, including public hearings in both the Sahtú and Wek'èezhìi areas. Each Board submitted its own Reasons for Decision report.

Throughout the proceeding, the Bluenose-East Ɂekwò herd decline has been compared to the decline observed in the neighbouring Bathurst Ɂekwò herd, with the Bluenose-East herd “...declining now at a rate as fast as the Bathurst herd did during its most rapid decline between 2006 and 2009”.<sup>1</sup> Vital rates associated with the herd, including the cow survival rate, calf recruitment, and pregnancy rate, all indicate that the decline is recent and that the herd is likely to continue to decline in the near future. With the addition of changing environmental conditions, including severe drought conditions, significant forest fire events, and disturbance on key parts of the range, recovery of the herd remains uncertain. Additionally, evidence from the Tłıchq elders and public suggested a willingness to restrict harvesting, and leave the caribou alone. Therefore, the WRRB concluded that, despite the hardships that the Tłıchq and other Aboriginal harvesters will endure, the majority of the Aboriginal and scientific evidence submitted suggests that harvest restriction is warranted and urgently required.

In the Tłıchq Agreement, a TAH level is defined as “*in relation to a population or stock of wildlife, the total amount of that population or stock that may be harvested annually*”, i.e. a TAH is an absolute number of caribou that can be harvested from a particular herd. As per Section 12.5.5(a)(i) of the Tłıchq Agreement, the WRRB has sole responsibility for making a final determination with respect to a TAH for Wek'èezhìi.

Based on the demographic indicators and evidence from Tłıchq elders, the WRRB concluded that the Bluenose-East herd is at a higher risk than proposed by TG and ENR; therefore, the proposed TAH of 950 bulls-only caribou (approximately 2.5% of the population estimate) is not conservative enough. As such, the Board believes that an acceptable harvest would be 1.9%, i.e. a TAH of 750 bulls-only caribou. A limited harvest of *yaagoa* (younger bull; third year male caribou) in the early spring, and *wedzih* (biggest male caribou) in the late spring and fall will permit food security for Tłıchq citizens, slow the rate of herd decline, and ensure that cows can still be protected by the large bulls.

The WRRB determined that a TAH of 750 bulls-only shall be implemented for all users of the Bluenose-East caribou herd within Wek'èezhìi for the 2016/17, 2017/18, 2018/19 harvest seasons. Further, the Board determined that the proportional allocation of the TAH of the Bluenose-East caribou herd for the 2016/17, 2017/18, 2018/19 harvest seasons shall be as follows: Tłıchq Citizens – 39.29%, and Members of an Aboriginal people who traditionally harvest Bluenose-East caribou (including Nunavut) – 60.71%.

As monitoring of the caribou wildlife management units and Bluenose-East caribou harvest are intricately linked to the implementation of a TAH, the Board recommended that TG and ENR agree on an approach to designating zones for aerial and ground-based surveillance throughout the fall and winter harvests seasons from 2016 to 2019. These harvest management actions are to be implemented by July 1, 2016, the start of the 2016/17 harvest season. Additionally, the

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<sup>1</sup> PR (BNE) – 136: ENR to WRRB – Bluenose-East Caribou Public Hearing Presentation. 2016.

WRRB recommended weekly communication updates, timely implementation of hunter education programs for all harvesters of the Bluenose-East herd and development of harvesting overlap agreements with the Sahtú and Nunavut.

The WRRB also recommended that the wolf feasibility assessment set out in the proposal be led by the Board with input and support from TG and ENR. The feasibility assessment would primarily be an examination of all options for wolf management, including costs, practicality and effectiveness. The Board requested that this assessment be initiated in June 2016. If the Community-based Wolf Harvesting Project is deemed successful on the Bathurst caribou herd range, the approach could be extended in 2016-2017 to the Bluenose-East herd and incorporated into an adaptive wolf management approach.

With the Bluenose-East caribou herd in a critical state, all peoples who harvest in Wek'èezhìi must do their part to ensure the recovery of the herd. Users and managers must act now, in whatever ways possible, to protect the herd so future recovery may be possible.

*“And now we have to work together. There’s a big issue that we have to tackle. ... If we have to restrict our harvesting rights then we – we have to. ... We also want our young people, when – when they get older to still be able to hunt caribou. So there is going to be some recommendations that a lot of people might not be happy with. There might be some restrictions put on us, but we have to live with that, because we are in crisis where the caribou is concerned. So if we tackle this precisely, cautiously, as with one mind, then we should be able to resolve this.”<sup>2</sup>*

Elder and Former Grand Chief Joe Rabesca

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<sup>2</sup> PR (BNE) – 166: Transcript – April 6, 2016 (Day 1) – Bluenose-East Caribou Herd Public Hearing, 2016. pp. 119-120.