

Summary of the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board's report, entitled "Report on a Public Hearing Held by the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board, 23-24 February 2016, Yellowknife, NT & Reasons for Decisions Related to a Joint Proposal for the Management of Bathurst 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 Bathurst caribou herd. In September 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 Bathurst herd had continued to decline significantly. The total number of breeding females had declined from an estimate of 15,935 (95% CI=13,009-18,861) in 2012 to an estimate of 8,075 (95% CI=4608-11,542) in 2015, a decline of about 50%. The total population estimate fell from 34,690 (95% CI=24,935-44,445) in 2012 to an estimate of 19,769 (95% CI=12,349-27,189) in 2015 – a decline of approximately 40% over three years and a decrease of 96% since the peak population estimated at 470,000 in 1986. Therefore, in their view, ENR felt that further management actions were required.

In December 2015, the Tłıchǫ Government (TG) and ENR submitted the *Joint Proposal on Caribou Management Actions for the Bathurst Herd: 2016-2019* to the Board, which proposed new restrictions on hunter harvest, predator management to reduce wolf populations on the winter range of the Bathurst caribou herd and ongoing biological monitoring. 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 Tłıchǫ Agreement and held a public hearing in Yellowknife, NT on February 23-24, 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 Bathurst 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. Therefore, the WRRB concluded, based on all available Aboriginal and scientific evidence, that a serious conservation concern exists for the Bathurst caribou herd and that additional management actions are vital for herd recovery.

However, in order to allow careful consideration of all of the information 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 mobile wolf-hunter camp and the wolf feasibility assessment. The second report, Part B, dealt with additional predator management actions, biological and environmental monitoring, and cumulative effects.

The WRRB determined that a TAH of zero shall be implemented for all users of the Bathurst caribou herd within Wek'èezhì for 2016 to 2019. While the Tłıchǫ and other traditional users stand to lose a close connection with caribou and the land, it was noted that any harvesting from

the Bathurst herd is no longer scientifically and culturally viable. Further, while a harvest of zero does not ensure that the Bathurst caribou herd will stabilize or recover, a harvest closure based on the precautionary principle will eliminate any direct and/or additional sources of mortality to Bathurst caribou caused by people. 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.

The Board believes that the Bathurst caribou herd is in crisis given the continuing decline in the breeding females, poor vital rates, impacts of environmental factors (e.g. poor summer feeding conditions), and extensive exploration and development on the herd's annual range; therefore, a TAH of zero must be implemented without delay. 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'èezhì.

As monitoring of the caribou wildlife management units and Bathurst caribou harvest are intricately linked to the implementation of a TAH, the Board recommended that TG and ENR agree on an approach to harvest zoning and conduct 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 WRRB recommended timely implementation of hunter education programs in all Tłıchq communities.

The Community-based Wolf Harvesting Project, proposed by TG and ENR as a pilot training program, is to train Tłıchq harvesters, in a culturally appropriate manner, to hunt and trap wolves on the Bathurst herd range. The Board continues to support the Project as a training program, with recommendations related to implementation and assessment. Prior to the Wolf Project start up, the Board requests an update from TG and ENR in December 2016.

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.

With the Bathurst 2ekwò herd in such a perilous state, all peoples who harvest in Wek'èezhì 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 as people, we always --it was our tradition. It was our tradition. All our trails are starting to disappear as the caribou trails are disappearing. And so today let's help each other with the caribou. And so as I speak today, I wonder how can I help my people. How

can I help future generations, my future grandchildren, their grandchildren, to --to how far --how far into the future can we make plans for them.”¹

Elder Joseph Judas

¹ PR (BATH) – 153: Transcript – February 23, 2016 (Day 1) – Bathurst Caribou Herd Public Hearing. 2016. p.115.