

ENR Closing Remarks

Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board – Public Hearing

Thank you for the opportunity to provide closing remarks from Environment and Natural Resources. We thank the Board and people of Behchoko for their hospitality throughout the public hearings.

We have listened closely to the statements made by elders, Tlicho Government, Yellowknives Dene First Nation, other intervenors and members of the public. We would like to thank everyone for sharing their views openly and honestly.

We are confident the information we have presented about the caribou is accurate.

This is the story the information tells.

First, the movements of the collared cows tell us that most cows from one herd use the same calving ground and the same fall and winter range. This has not changed in the past 15 years. The movements show that almost all caribou in Wek'eezhii are from two herds - the Bluenose-East herd and the Bathurst herd. In winter, the Bluenose-East herd is usually close to Gameti and Whati. The Bathurst herd is usually found around Wekweeti and north and east of Yellowknife.

Second, people have asked that we survey all the herds at the same time. We have done this twice. In 2007 and 2008, the entire tundra from Mackenzie Delta to Hudson Bay was flown and, for two years, all calving areas were surveyed at the same time. In June, collared cows were on the calving grounds as expected. The rate of collared cows

switching between herds is low. In addition, there have been no increases in neighbouring herds. It is this information that tells us caribou have not moved elsewhere.

Third, we do have an explanation of how the decline happened. ENR believes that most of the decline of the Bathurst herd is due to a natural cycle, which has happened many times in the past. We also know that caribou and reindeer across their global range are not doing very well; most populations are declining. In particular, conditions in the early 2000s were poor in the NWT – low pregnancy rates, poor calf survival and late calving all point to herds that would have declined regardless of harvest levels. We know that development, like diamond mines, has some effect on caribou but in other herds where there are no mines, caribou numbers have also declined. For the Bathurst herd, we know between 2000 and 2005, calf survival was low which means today we have few caribou that are between the ages of 5 and 10. If we have mostly old and young cows, then you do not have many that are producing calves.

Fourth, harvest information was collected in the past two years from winter road check stations, hunter interviews in Tlicho communities and outfitters. By looking at caribou collar locations in fall and winter, we can say the majority of the harvest in the winter of 2008-09 came from the Bathurst herd. This harvest was between 5,000 to 7,000 caribou, mostly cows. When the herd was 350,000, this was a small amount of the herd, between two and six percent. When a herd is down to 32,000 caribou, of which about 16,000 are breeding cows, we cannot continue to harvest 5,000 to 7,000 caribou. This is fifteen to twenty two percent of the herd and this is too high.

We have heard elders talk about the days when thousands of caribou walked by for days. No one has seen that in recent years. Some outfitters talked about seeing thousands of caribou last summer but less than half their hunts were successful. This is the lowest success rate ever recorded by outfitters.

When caribou numbers are so few and the rate of decline is so steep, we must take action to help caribou now. Some people and groups have already taken action and reduced their harvest voluntarily. You heard people speak about these actions and they should be recognized.

For recovery, the herd needs more calves to survive and above all, higher survival rates in cows. Some factors that affect caribou are difficult to manage, but harvest and wolves are something we can manage.

Restriction of cow hunting will directly contribute to higher survival in cows. Harvest management in other NWT herds (Cape Bathurst and Bluenose-West herds) has been effective – these are currently the only herds monitored by GNWT that are showing a stable trend. Actions for those herds were recommended by co-management boards (Sahtu, Gwichin, and Inuvialuit).

We agree that making good decisions requires the best information available, both from science and from traditional knowledge. ENR has used the recommendations from the ARC report to improve the information available. We are confident this information tells a story that caribou numbers are low and actions are needed to help cows

survive and increase in number. We, in this room, have the power to take those actions.

ENR worked with the Tlicho Government on a government to government basis to come to agreement on actions that were not agreed to in the original joint proposal submitted in November 2009. The revised joint proposal contains actions to reduce harvest and wolf numbers to increase survival of caribou. ENR believes that wolf numbers in the Bathurst range have declined substantially. However, ENR will invest in further study to determine wolf numbers and predation rate. ENR will also work with Tlicho Government and other Aboriginal organizations to increase support to hunters and trappers that hunt wolves.

ENR also held workshops in regions to review the forest fire program this spring and obtain views on prioritizing the values at risk that people want protected.

We agree we must do a better job to keep people informed and in the joint proposal, ENR commits to involving Tlicho Government and citizens in management and monitoring actions. However, we do not have much time to make decisions. We believe actions must be agreed on before the next hunting season.

The third party review by the Alberta Research Council of ENR data was the Department's approach to accommodate and comply with those who required additional assurance that ENR's methods were valid. Mr. Roy from the Alberta Research Council clearly stated that ENR data confirm a decline in caribou numbers and ENR has implemented most of report's recommendations.

ENR has met with outfitters many times since 2003 to discuss survey results, share information and identify recovery options. We ask the Board to review how ENR's information has been interpreted by some other parties. When ENR has examined these presentations, we find that statements made by ENR staff have been taken out of context and not all ENR information has been used in the analysis. We are concerned that some interpretations are mis-information aimed at delaying management actions.

There continue to be comments ENR has not been transparent or forthcoming with information. Since November 2009, intervenors had several opportunities to make requests to the Board for information. ENR has responded to all requests from the Board for information. ENR has provided hundreds of pages of documents and raw data. As well, intervenors have been provided additional information for the Board to consider. ENR is confident the Board has the best information available to make its decisions

In reviewing the statements provided by intervenors, ENR notes that no one has provided any new information to document caribou numbers are strong. No one is saying they see as many caribou now as they did 20 years ago. This is an important point for everyone to think about.

ENR agrees with statements made at this hearing by elders and others there is no one cause for the caribou decline. Our environment is changing and we should be careful so we have caribou for our children. ENR agrees all Aboriginal people have the right to hunt caribou, as long as caribou are abundant. When caribou are abundant, all people

should be able to benefit and use caribou. However, now there are not many caribou.

Elders talked about times when there were restrictions on beaver or marten or caribou. But a few years later, these animals became plentiful again and there were no more restrictions. Elders talk about how their parents taught them to take only what was needed and to leave seed for the future. In the old days, when caribou went away for a few years, people survived by fishing and hunting other animals. All elders also know stories about those times when the caribou went away.

ENR agrees that we must respect the caribou. No one owns the caribou. ENR is prepared to do their part. ENR will work with the Tlicho Government and other Aboriginal organizations to increase use of traditional knowledge in management and help people pass on traditional laws about caribou. Elders spoke about some, such as, sharing your harvest with your family and widows, to not hunt until the leaders of the caribou have passed, and to give your first caribou to elders to taste.

The revised joint proposal submitted by Tlicho Government and ENR is asking the Board to consider the following:

1. ENR has presented biological evidence there has been a steep and rapid decline of the Bathurst herd.
2. The revised joint proposal recommends an adaptive management approach that can be adjusted at intervals as additional information is gained.

3. The revised joint proposal recommends three objectives for the Bathurst herd over the next three years:
 - a. Take immediate actions to stop the decline. From a biological perspective, the best option for recovery of the Bathurst herd would be no further harvest until the herd can again sustain it. However, to strengthen the Tlicho culture, language and way of life, some harvest of caribou must continue. ENR and the Tlicho Government have suggested a limited harvest of around 300 for the entire Bathurst herd, focusing on young bulls. This is about the level of harvest taken this past winter. This harvest would be shared with Aboriginal groups both inside and outside Wek'eezhii. .
 - b. Mandatory reporting of all harvesting – this is a fundamental requirement for management. There are several options to implement this measure.
 - c. Develop a longer term management plan by 2012 that is done co-operatively and allows for input by all people. This recovery plan should be for the entire range of the herd.

4. For the Bluenose-East herd, the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board limited all resident and outfitted hunting of the Bluenose-East herd in Sahtu because of the decline. The joint proposal asks the Wek'eezhii Board to do the same for this herd in Wek'eezhii. Aboriginal hunters should try to reduce their harvest also and the harvest level should be reviewed when the new herd estimate is available in the fall. The collaborative management planning process for this herd should continue.

5. For the Ahiak herd, the revised joint proposal recommends a longer term management plan that is done co-operatively with all governments and allows for input by all people. Again there should be a focus on increasing cow and calf survival.

ENR recognizes the duty to consult. ENR commits to continue to work with Aboriginal groups outside of Wek'eezhii on developing actions for managing shared caribou herds. In developing the revised joint proposal, ENR also provided opportunities for input from other interest groups and considered their advice.

In closing, ENR would like to thank the Tlicho Government for the opportunity to work together and believe this is the foundation for a strong relationship to help caribou numbers increase and implement the Tlicho Agreement. ENR looks forward to working with the Tlicho Government to implement the Board's decisions in Wek'eezhii.

ENR understands the Board must make difficult decisions. As the elders say, it is time for people and leaders to be strong and work together to make the best decisions so caribou can be strong again.

Mahsi.