December 2, 2024

Joseph Judas, Chair
Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board
4504 49TH AVENUE, YELLOWKNIFE NT, X1A 1A7
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Dear Mr. Judas:

Kǫ̀k'èetì Ekwǫ̀ Management Action Extension

The Tłı̨chǫ Government and Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) are requesting to further extend the implementation of the 2022 Recommendations on the Joint Management Proposal for the Kǫ̀k'èetì (Bathurst) Ekwǫ̀ herd until June 2027.

In compliance with Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board (WRRB) Recommendation #1-2023 (Kǫ̀k'èetì Ekwǫ̀), the Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT did not conduct a reconnaissance nor calving ground survey in June 2024. Absent a new population estimate to complement on-the-ground observations by Tłı̨chǫ Government's Ekwǫ̀ Nàxoèdee K'è program and data on other demographic indicators, the Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT do not propose substantive changes to the suite of management actions that are currently in place.

The Bathurst caribou herd has been relatively stable at low numbers since 2018 with the most recent population estimate in 2022 of 6,851 caribou (95% CI of 3,895 – 12,050). Other indicators such as adult female survival rates for 2022 of 80% and proportion of breeding females in 2023 of 83% can be considered consistent with herd stability. Recent calf:cow ratios from fall 2024, however, are lower than what we typically expect from stable herds, at 27.3 calves per 100 cows (95% CI 21.1,33.6). The Bathurst Caribou Management Plan has a population threshold of 30,000 as defining the Critical Herd Status. Given all of the monitoring information available for the herd, we anticipate it will continue to remain within that herd status level over the short term. Within this context, we believe that maintaining the existing management and monitoring actions is appropriate.

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An extension of current management and monitoring actions to June 2027 allows for a new population estimate to be derived in 2026 and will provide time to conduct community engagement and consultations with Elders in winter 2025/2026.

A new population estimate will be an important, foundational piece of information, along with the other monitoring indicators, on which to support ongoing co-management actions, base communications and to help develop and inform a new proposal for submission in May 2026. The extension will also allow presentation and discussion of the new Bathurst population estimate at the Bathurst Caribou Advisory Committee (BCAC) annual status meeting in December 2025 and the potential to align the joint management proposal and the BCAC annual action plan.

This letter provides an update on current management actions, while also proposing **two modifications** to GNWT-led monitoring of the herd.

1. The GNWT plans to conduct a calving ground, reconnaissance, and composition survey of the Bathurst herd in June 2025. The most recent Bathurst population estimate was obtained in June 2022. A June 2025 survey will provide an updated population estimate by late 2025 to inform a new joint management proposal for the Bathurst herd in 2026.
2. The GNWT will modify the frequency of composition surveys for the Bathurst herd. Since 2019, fall, late winter, and June calving ground composition surveys have been conducted annually. Moving forward, annual fall composition surveys on the Bathurst herd will be prioritized with late winter composition surveys undertaken as needed (e.g., if fall surveys are unsuccessful). June composition surveys on the calving ground will only be conducted in years of calving ground photo surveys. The rationale for these changes to composition survey frequency are provided in the Monitoring and Research section below.

Updates on the remaining monitoring and management actions are provided below.

<u>Harvest Management through implementation of Mobile Zone</u>

The Mobile Core Bathurst Caribou Management Zone (the Mobile Zone) is used to implement a total allowable harvest (TAH) of 0 for the Bathurst herd in the Northwest Territories (WRRB Determination 1-2016). An analysis of the effectiveness of the Mobile Zone completed in 2023 concludes that the Mobile Zone has been a useful and flexible management tool. Both governments agree that the Mobile Zone remains an effective tool relative to fixed management zones for protecting the Bathurst herd while also allowing harvester access to other herds.

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Rules for Definition of the Mobile Zone (attached) were co-developed by the GNWT, Tłı̨chǫ Government, and WRRB, and guide the delineation of the boundaries on a weekly basis based on the locations and movement rates of collared Bathurst cows and bulls. The target number of collars for delineating the mobile zone is 70 (50 cows, 20 bulls). However, actual numbers of collars deployed on Bathurst caribou are much lower, with 11 female and 3 male caribou currently collared. Low collar numbers reflect a similar challenge to that faced by late winter composition surveys (described below), wherein targeting Bathurst caribou for collaring in late winter has been made difficult due to extensive mixing of the Bathurst herd with the much larger Bluenose-East and Beverly herds in recent years (2018-present). This challenge remains, despite efforts to direct late winter March collaring efforts towards groups of caribou with known Bathurst collars present.

To address the issue of low collar numbers, GNWT made two attempts in 2024 to collar Bathurst caribou at different times of year when they are separated from adjacent herds. First, collaring was attempted at a water crossing on Contwoyto Lake (Kǫ̀k'èetì) in July. No collars were deployed as a result of Bathurst caribou not utilizing the crossing while the collaring crew was present. However, a number of lessons were learned that will help inform use of this approach in the future. Second, collaring was attempted during the fall rut in October in which 12 female caribou were collared. These animals were collared within a group that contained known Bathurst collars but, consistent with existing protocols for herd assignments, they will not be assigned to a herd until they migrate to their calving grounds in the spring. The GNWT will continue to attempt to collar Bathurst animals at times of greatest separation.

Given the low collar numbers, and consistent with the Rules, the Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT propose that in winter 2025 a 50 km buffer be used around the minimum convex polygon of weekly Bathurst collar locations to delineate the mobile zone. This fixed buffer is considered to adequately define the herd range for the implementation of the TAH in winter 2025. To inform considerations of alternatives to deriving and applying the Mobile Zone boundaries and possibly alternatives to the Mobile Zone itself, the Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT propose to undertake technical analyses of the Mobile Zone extents and its overlap with adjacent herds prior to the submission of its next proposal. We also suggest the topic of Mobile Zone alternatives be discussed and recommendations be made by the Barren-ground Caribou Technical Working Group (comprised of Tłı̨chǫ Government, GNWT and WRRB staff).

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Predator Management

A joint Tłı̨chǫ Government-GNWT joint wolf management program to reduce predation on the Bluenose-East and Bathurst caribou winter ranges was undertaken over a 5-year period ending in July 2024. Annual reports on program activities are available on the WRRB website and from the GNWT. An evaluation of the overall 5- year program and consideration of further predator management actions is underway.

Although enhanced incentives associated with the 5-year wolf management program are no longer in place, other supports for wolf harvesting on the Bathurst herd's winter range continue. The GNWT's $200 incentive for any wolf harvested in the North Slave Region of the NWT remains in place. The Tłı̨chǫ Government plans to continue to encourage and support wolf harvest by its members and will consider continuing to implement a cultural camp to support wolf harvest. The Government of Nunavut continues to implement a wolf harvest incentive program in the Kitikmeot region of Nunavut which encompasses parts of the Bathurst range.

Habitat and Land Use

The Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT continue to participate in range planning, environmental assessments, and land use planning processes in NWT and Nunavut that may affect the herd and its range. The Bathurst Caribou Range Plan continues to be implemented with a five-year review and progress report currently underway. Under the range plan, the GNWT developed an implementation framework and operational guidance for mobile conservation measures, a flexible tool for reducing sensory disturbance to caribou during industrial exploration. Both governments are working together with industry to implement these measures and provide guidance on minimizing disturbance from exploration activities. The GNWT and Tłı̨chǫ Government also continue to support habitat conservation work outlined in the range plan being led by the BCAC and Caribou Guardians Coalition. Recently, both governments made submissions to the Nunavut Impact Review Board concerning the proposed Grays Bay Road and Port project[1], emphasizing the need to consider and mitigate project impacts on Bathurst caribou.

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[1] https://www.nirb.ca/project/125987

Education

The Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT recognize the importance of communication and engagement with communities, harvesters, and the public about the status, conservation, and management of Bathurst caribou and all other barren-ground caribou herds in the NWT. Ongoing education and public awareness initiatives include promoting traditional ways of harvesting, improving hunter practices, and reducing wounding and wastage through the GNWT's Hunter Education program for new/young hunters, the Tłı̨chǫ Government's Ekwò Harvest Monitoring Program, and respectful harvester communication campaigns.

In the 2024 joint management proposal for the Sahtì (Bluenose-East) Ekwo herd, the GNWT and Tłı̨chǫ Government proposed to undertake a joint Tłı̨chǫ community tour to present on and discuss barren-ground caribou conservation, management, and herd status with communities. These discussions will help to inform future Bluenose-East and Bathurst conservation and management actions put forth by both governments, including in the next Bathurst joint management proposal to the WRRB.

Monitoring and Research

Monitoring. Outside of the changes described on page 2, monitoring activities for Kǫ̀k'èetì Ekwǫ̀ will continue largely unchanged from those initially approved by WRRB in 2019. The Tłı̨chǫ Government has operated the Ekwǫ̀ Nàxoèhdee K'è on-the-land caribou monitoring program for Kǫ̀k'èetì Ekwǫ̀ annually since 2016 and plans to continue this monitoring for the foreseeable future.

The Tłı̨chǫ Government also implements an Ekwò Harvest Monitoring Program along the Tibbett-to-Contwoyto winter road each year to monitor harvest of ekwò by Tłı̨chǫ hunters, to help Tłı̨chǫ hunters understand GNWT regulations (including the Mobile Zone regulations), and to encourage respectful harvesting. GNWT monitoring activities will continue to include calving ground, reconnaissance, and composition surveys along with satellite collaring of Bathurst caribou.

The GNWT is planning for a population survey, reconnaissance survey, and composition survey in June 2025, three years after the last population survey in 2022. The proposed frequency of Bathurst calving ground surveys beyond June 2025 will be included in the next joint management proposal. Deployment of satellite radio-collars will continue at target numbers of 70 caribou (50 cows and 20 bulls). As was the case in 2024, consideration will be given to attempting collaring in different times of year when herd separation is greater and using alternative methods to increase the likelihood of targeting Bathurst caribou specifically.

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The decision to reduce the frequency of late winter and June composition surveys is based on several considerations. The GNWT has been relatively successful in estimating herd-specific calf:cow ratios in the fall in the Bathurst herd due to generally good spatial separation of herds at that time of year. In contrast, estimation of late-winter calf:cow ratios for the Bathurst herd over the same time period has been challenging due to extensive mixing with the Bluenose-East and Beverly herds. Thus, of the two surveys, the fall surveys provide more reliable information on herd-specific estimates for the Bathurst herd. In addition, late-winter calf:cow ratios in the Bathurst herd that followed fall calf:cow ratios have generally shown very similar patterns with March ratios being 0-5% lower. Of the two composition surveys (fall and late-winter), the fall surveys provide more reliable information on herd-specific estimates for the Bathurst herd.

Prior to 2019, composition surveys in June were flown only in years of calving ground photo surveys as they are an integral part of those surveys. These surveys provide information on the proportion of breeding females in June (a proxy for the pregnancy rate). Less frequent June composition surveys should provide sufficient monitoring of the proportion of breeding females in the herd and in part address WRRB concerns about reducing disturbance to caribou on the calving grounds. Further details on information provided by compositions surveys and reasons for changing the frequency are given in the 2024 Joint Management Proposal for Sahtì (Bluenose-East) Ekwǫ̀[2] and the associated Responses to Information Requests[3].

Research. Beyond the monitoring activities outlined above, the Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT continue to support and be involved in various scientific and Traditional Knowledge research projects and partnerships related to caribou abundance, demographics, range condition, and health.

These include the *Fate of the Caribou project*[4] led by Dr. Eliezer Gurarie at the State University of New York; a collaborative effort to develop decision-support tools to simulate cumulative effects of landscape changes, industry, and management practices on five barren-ground caribou herds in the NWT; and involvement in a 3-year research program funded by the GNWT Cumulative Impacts Monitoring Program and Polar Knowledge Canada. Collectively, these research initiatives will continue to contribute information on caribou and habitat condition, herd composition, predators, and the influence of environmental conditions and cumulative effects.

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[2] https://www.wrrb.ca/sites/default/files/TG-%20GNWT%20CLetter%20%26%20Bluenose-East%20Management%20Proposal%20Aug2024.pdf
[3] https://www.wrrb.ca/sites/default/files/TG-GNWT%20responses%20to%20WRRB%20Sahti%20Ekwo%20information%20requests.pdf
[4] https://fateofthecaribou.github.io/People.html

The Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT are committed to working together and with all co-management partners across the NWT and Nunavut to support conservation of Kǫ̀k'èetì Ekwǫ̀. Both governments will continue to share information from their research and monitoring activities with co-management partners, including at upcoming BCAC meeting in December 2024, and look forward to submitting a new joint management proposal to WRRB in 2026.

The Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT thank the WRRB for their on-going commitment to caribou co-management and look forward to receiving the Board's response and recommendations.

Sincerely,

Brett Wheler
A/Director
Department of Culture and Lands Protection
Tłı̨chǫ Government

Heather Sayine-Crawford
Director, Wildlife Management Division
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Attachment

c. Distribution list

Distribution List

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