

Backgrounder

Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board Reasons for Decision Final Report - Bluenose-East Caribou Herd, Part A

The Reasons for Decision final 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 the Bluenose-East ʔekwò (Barren-ground caribou) Herd, Part A*, is posted on the WRRB Public Registry at <http://wrrb.ca/public-information/public-registry>.

The Reasons for Decision final report addresses management actions proposed by the Tłchq Government and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR), Government of the Northwest Territories in their *Joint Proposal on Management Actions for Bluenose-East Caribou: 2016-2019*.

In order to carefully consider all the information on the record and to meet legislated timelines, the WRRB decided to prepare two separate reports for submission to the Tłchq Government and ENR. This first report, Part A, addresses the proposed management actions that will require regulation changes in order for new regulations to be in place for the start of the 2016 / 2017 harvest season, as well as a collaborative wolf feasibility assessment.

Part B of the Reasons for Decision Report, to be submitted in August 2016, will address additional predator management actions, biological and environmental monitoring, and cumulative effects.

WRRB Mandate

- The WRRB has a mandate for wildlife, plants and forest management in Wek'èezhì and adheres to the principles and practices of conservation in fulfilling its duties.
- The Board shares responsibilities for managing and monitoring the Bluenose-East caribou herd.

2016 Proceeding for the Bluenose-East Caribou Herd

Joint Management Proposal

- In November 2015, ENR reported that, based on a calving ground photographic survey conducted in June 2015, the Bluenose-East caribou herd had continued to decline significantly.
- Specifically, the number of breeding females had declined from an estimated 34,472 in 2013 to 17,396 in 2015, a decline by about 29% per year since 2013. The rate of decline in breeding females between 2013 and 2015 is accelerated compared to between 2010 and 2013 when the annual rate of decline in breeding females was 14%. The total

population estimate for the herd fell from an estimated 68,295 in 2013 to 38,592 in 2015 - a decline of approximately 43%.

- In December 2015, the Tłchq Government and ENR submitted the *Joint Proposal on Management Actions for Bluenose-East Caribou 2016-2019* to the WRRB, outlining proposed management actions for the Bluenose-East ɛekwò herd in Wek'èezhì, including new restrictions on hunter harvest, predator management and ongoing monitoring.

Public Hearing on the Bluenose-East Caribou Herd

- The WRRB considered any specific restriction of harvest or component of harvest as the establishment of a total allowable harvest (TAH). Under Section 12.3.10 of the Tłchq Agreement, the Board is required to hold a public hearing when considering a TAH for a wildlife population that has not been subject to a TAH in the previous two years.
- After review and analysis of the joint proposal, the WRRB held a public hearing in Behchokò, NT on April 6-8, 2016.
- Under the Collaborative Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the ʔehdzo Got'ınę Gots'ę Nákedı / Sahtú Renewable Resources Board (SRRB), the SRRB and the WRRB agreed to collaborate in the conduct of their proceedings and share information collected as evidence prior to making final decisions under their respective jurisdictions. Representatives of the WRRB attended the public hearing on the Bluenose-East caribou herd held in the Sahtú in March 2016. Each Board conducted its own proceedings and is submitting its own Reasons for Decision report.

Conservation Concerns

- Throughout its proceeding, the Board heard from governments, communities and members of the public on their concerns over the decline of the Bluenose-East caribou herd.
- Tłchq and other traditional users expressed serious stewardship concerns for the Bluenose-East caribou herd. It was noted that the herd is “stressed” and its population is low. Concerns were also raised over the state of the caribou’s habitat in relation to loss of winter habitat, important landscape features such as water crossings and trails, and foraging availability, due to forest fires, changing environmental conditions, industry and infrastructure.
- Vital rates associated with the herd, including the cow survival rate, calf recruitment, and pregnancy rate, indicate that the herd has continued to decline and is likely to decline in the near future.
- The cow survival rate between 2013 and 2015 was estimated to have been 71%, which is below the 80-85% associated with a stable herd. Calf to cow ratios in recent years averaged 28 calves:100 cows, which is below the 30-40 calves:100 cows associated with

stable herds. The pregnancy rate in winter 2014/15 was about 64%, less than the typical 80% seen in a healthy herd.

- Based on available Aboriginal and scientific evidence, the WRRB concluded that a serious conservation concern exists for the Bluenose-East caribou.

WRRB Determination on TAH

- The Board believes that a serious conservation concern exists for the Bluenose-East caribou herd given the high rate of decline, the accelerated decline in the number of breeding females, poor vital rates, changing environmental conditions and increased levels of disturbance on key parts of the range.
- Under the Tłıchq Agreement, the Board has sole responsibility for making a final determination with respect to a TAH for Wek'èezhìi (Section 12.5.5(a)(i) of the Tłıchq Agreement). Such action may only be taken for the purposes of conservation.
- The Board determined that a total allowable harvest of 750 bull caribou only shall be implemented for all users of the Bluenose-East caribou herd within Wek'èezhìi for 2016 to 2019.
- As the Bluenose-East herd is at a critical state, the WRRB requires its determination of a TAH of 750 be implemented by July 1, 2016, which is the start of the 2016 / 2017 harvest season.
- The Board also determined that the proportional allocation of the total allowable harvest for the Bluenose-East caribou herd shall be 39.29% for Tłıchq Citizens and 60.71% for members of an Aboriginal people who traditionally harvest Bluenose-East caribou (includes Nunavut).
- Further, the Board determined that the Tłıchq Government should determine distribution of the allocation with Tłıchq communities and ENR should determine distribution of the allocation to members of an Aboriginal people who traditionally harvest Bluenose-East caribou in consultation with those groups.

WRRB Recommendations

- The Board recommended that the Tłıchq Government and ENR agree on an approach to harvest zoning for implementation by July 1, 2016, and conduct compliance monitoring throughout the fall and winter harvest seasons from 2016 to 2019.
- The Board also recommended that the Tłıchq Government and ENR provide weekly updates to the WRRB and the general public on compliance surveillance of the Bluenose-East herd, as well as weekly harvest updates, throughout the fall and winter seasons for 2016 to 2019.
- Additionally, the WRRB recommended increased communications and public education programs, including the timely implementation of hunter education programs in Wek'èezhìi.

- Due to concerns about timely completion, the WRRB also recommended that the wolf feasibility assessment set out in the proposal be led by the Board with input and support from the Tłıchǵ Government and ENR. The collaborative feasibility assessment would primarily be an examination of all options for wolf management, including costs, practicality and effectiveness.