

May 27, 2022

Grand Chief Jackson Lafferty
Tłıchọ Government
Email: jackson.lafferty@tlichoc.ca

Hon. Shane Thompson, Minister
Environment and Natural Resources
Government of the Northwest Territories
Email: Shane_Thompson@gov.nt.ca

Via Email
jackson.lafferty@tlichoc.ca
Shane_Thompson@gov.nt.ca

Re: Joint Management Proposal for Kọk'èetı (Bathurst) Ekwò Herd

Dear Grand Chief Lafferty and Minister Thompson:

As per section 12.5.1 of the Tłıchọ Agreement, the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board (WRRB) considered the above-mentioned proposal, submitted by the Tłıchọ Government (TG) and the Government of the Northwest Territories, (GNWT) on January 28, 2022, a wildlife management proposal for the period of July 1, 2022 to July 1, 2024. The short-term goals of the joint management proposal are to halt the Kọk'èetı Ekwò herd's decline and promote recovery while working towards the longer-term goal of enabling a sustainable caribou harvest that addresses Indigenous communities' needs across the Kọk'èetı herd's range.

Based on the WRRB's Rule for Management Proposals, the WRRB determined to undertake a modified Level 1 review. The joint management proposal was posted to the WRRB's website on the Management Proposals page from February 18, 2022 to April 25, 2022. During their recent May 2022 meeting, the Board reviewed all the information available on the record and have made the following decisions.

Proposed Management and Monitoring Actions

TG and GNWT's joint management proposal emphasizes continuing the existing management and monitoring actions from the WRRB's 2019 Bathurst Caribou Proceeding as follows:

- *Harvest Management* – The total allowable harvest and harvest management actions are unchanged, including continued growth and implementation of the Tłıchọ Ekwò Harvest Monitoring Program.
- *Predator Management* – Predator management actions are unchanged.
- *Habitat & Land Use* – Implementation of the Bathurst Caribou Range Plan are ongoing.
- *Education* – Education initiatives are ongoing.

As such, no new determinations and/or recommendations are required for the above management and monitoring actions; therefore, implementation by TG and GNWT should continue.

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- *Monitoring & Research* – Monitoring management actions are unchanged except for the addition of a 2022 aerial reconnaissance survey on the Kòk'èti Ekwò calving ground. The intended purpose of the aerial reconnaissance survey would be to (i) assess distribution and separation/overlap of Kòk'èti and Beverly Ekwò during calving, (ii) assess relative abundance of Kòk'èti Ekwò, and (iii) assess proportions of breeding females, newborn calves, non-breeding females, yearlings, and young males at or near the peak of calving. Further, there is the possibility of conducting a calving ground photo survey in 2022, if there is clear separation of herds.

Emigration is the most serious issue now affecting the Kòk'èti Ekwò herd size, but current evidence is insufficient to support future management decisions. The Board is concerned that, despite the continuing decline of the Kòk'èti Ekwò herd, no specific approaches, scenarios, or analyses are proposed. Questions to be answered include “when will emigration be sufficient to cause the effective loss of identity of the Kòk'èti Ekwò herd?”. Neither the joint management proposal nor the 2021 calving report discuss management options related to emigration and there is no mention of emigration monitoring beyond collaring.

The WRRB notes a general shortage of information on, for example, the experience of other ʔekwò herds with emigration, differences between male and female emigration, or what is known about emigration in other members of the deer family or gregarious ungulates. Further, there has been no discussion about why the Beverly Ekwò herd has increasingly moved onto the winter range of the Kòk'èti and Sahti Ekwò herds as well as the probability of the overlap between herds continuing.

The WRRB also notes that the experience of co-management partners working together, such as during the wolf, grizzly bear, and wolverine assessments, would be useful in sharing information and recommending management options and considerations for emigration.

WRRB Recommendation #1-2022 (Kòk'èti Ekwò) – Through the Barren-ground Caribou Technical Working Group (BGCTWG), and with the WRRB as lead, TG and GNWT will draft a technical assessment of ‘emigration’ related to the Kòk'èti Ekwò herd, beginning in the summer of 2022.

The WRRB believes that the greatest threat to the Kòk'èti Ekwò herd’s recovery is emigration as the calf and adult survival rates have improved to the levels required for recovery. The joint management proposal adds an additional aerial reconnaissance survey in June 2022 to provide information on the calving distribution of the Kòk'èti and Beverly Ekwò herds and possibly an aerial photo survey to estimate abundance if there is clear separation of the two herds. The need for the survey is not identified in the 2021 Kòk'èti Ekwò calving ground survey report nor in the January 2022 Wildlife Research Permit application. The WRRB notes that the joint management proposal does not provide a rationale, survey design, nor criteria for ‘clear separation’ for the 2022 calving ground survey and did not explain how it is coordinated with the proposed sex and age composition survey also on the calving ground in June 2022.

The WRRB is concerned about the apparent transition to annual monitoring of ʔekwò on their calving ground as aerial surveys to estimate abundance were completed in 2021 and are proposed for 2022 and 2023. Furthermore, the WRRB’s concern is that the BGCTWG has not had an opportunity

to discuss the intensified monitoring and design for distribution surveys, the possible alternate scenarios for the status of the herd, nor the key assumptions for interpreting distribution east and west of Bathurst Inlet. The WRRB recognizes that there are trade-offs in monitoring, but the Board is mindful that the Tłıchǵ elders have stated that ɤekwǵ should be left alone and discussion is needed to explore how this increased monitoring can be reconciled with the senior elder's knowledge.

WRRB Recommendation #2-2022 (Kǵk'èetı Ekwǵ) – TG and GNWT will not conduct the June 2022 aerial reconnaissance survey to (i) assess distribution and separation/overlap of Kǵk'èetı and Beverly Ekwǵ during calving, ii) assess relative abundance of Kǵk'èetı Ekwǵ, and (iii) assess sex and age proportions nor the calving ground photo survey for the Kǵk'èetı Ekwǵ herd.

The WRRB also has questions about calving ground survey frequency to estimate herd size relative to a proposed photo survey in June 2022. There are trade-offs between statistical power to detect trends, survey frequency, and respecting the senior Tłıchǵ elders desire to leave ɤekwǵ alone. Additionally, the WRRB notes that problems in technical monitoring design may impair future management decisions as sex and age composition surveys are not being undertaken when the herds overlap in distribution. The gaps mean that interpreting the annual calf survival is restricted. Consequently, there is a priority to examine alternate approaches, including statistical methods, to adapt sex and age composition surveys in areas of overlap between herds.

Ongoing technical discussions amongst the co-management partners is also key to apply monitoring to management decisions for the Kǵk'èetı Ekwǵ herd. Due to continued winter range overlap between the Kǵk'èetı and Beverly Ekwǵ herds, the continued collaboration between Nunavut and Northwest Territories is also critical for fully discussing and managing the identified gaps.

WRRB Recommendation #3-2022 (Kǵk'èetı Ekwǵ) – TG and GNWT will come prepared to attend a technical workshop and discuss technical monitoring questions, including monitoring survey design in herd overlap areas and calving ground survey frequency and design. WRRB will organize and hold this technical workshop during the summer 2022 with invitations to members of the BGCTWG, Government of Nunavut, and statistical support, as necessary.

The joint management proposal suggests the need to intensify monitoring on the calving ground based on a possible rate of early calf loss in July 2020 and in June 2021. The rate of calf loss was not compared with previous years when vital rates were consistent with a decline. It is proposed to conduct sex and age composition surveys in June to measure early calf survival; however, interpreting that information requires surveys at peak of calving to estimate pregnancy rates, and a week later to detect early mortality and then follow-up surveys in July and October.

The WRRB notes that the fall calf-cow ratios for 2018 to 2020 are increasing and relatively high at the Adaptive Management Framework's recommended threshold of ≥ 40 calves:100 cows. As such, discussion is needed to determine what management actions are likely to come from estimating early calf survival and how to balance among competing objectives and techniques. The WRRB is concerned that existing collaborative structures, such as the BGCTWG's Adaptive Co-Management Framework, are not being used to share information on monitoring needs and approaches when trends show increasing vital rates, and possible recovery, for the Kǵk'èetı Ekwǵ herd.

WRRB Recommendation #4-2022 (Kòk'èti Ekwò) – TG and GNWT, through the BGCTWG, will use the existing Adaptive Co-Management Framework to reduce the gaps in available monitoring information about the Kòk'èti Ekwò herd, and to allow adjustments to be made if results are not achieved or if conditions change such that a different approach is warranted. Discussions will first occur in August 2022, as per the Framework's timeline, with a summary of findings and discussion developed and shared with partner organizations.

The WRRB notes the importance of understanding the changing distribution of the Beverly Ekwò herd and subsequent overlap with the Kòk'èti Ekwò herd's distribution and how these changes relate to the abundance of the Beverly herd.

WRRB Recommendation #5-2022 (Kòk'èti Ekwò) – TG and GNWT will collaborate and coordinate between the Northwest Territories and Nunavut to conduct calving ground surveys for the Beverly Ekwò herd, starting in 2023. This may include sharing costs and personnel to conduct the survey.

Public understanding about the reasons for the Kòk'èti ekwò population declines and the factors affecting the declines, including emigration, and the need for òekwò management actions is imperative given the relationship between Tìchq communities and òekwò.

WRRB Recommendation #6-2022 (Kòk'èti Ekwò) – TG and GNWT will develop a plain language summary of the joint management proposal and the 2021 calving ground survey to assist with communications in the Tìchq communities by August 31, 2022.

Previous Recommendations

The Board has recently reviewed its recommendations made since 2016 and note that several have not yet been implemented. The recommendations as accepted by TG and GNWT are attached and should be implemented as intended. The Board requests that TG and GNWT provide a timeline for the implementation of these approved measures by June 30, 2022. The rationale for implementing each outstanding recommendation is as follows:

- *WRRB Recommendation #12-2019 (Kòk'èti Ekwò)* – Exchange of information about Kòk'èti Ekwò with Tìchq communities is necessary to develop trust and improve understanding between the public and governments.
- *WRRB Recommendation #14-2019 (Kòk'èti Ekwò)* – Fecal pellet collection on the Kòk'èti ekwò winter range allows for an increased sample size and, therefore, a more representative pregnancy rate.
- *WRRB Recommendation #18-2019 (Kòk'èti Ekwò)* – Annual review of the implementation of Board recommendations, including an evaluation of success, tracks progress and ensures that important items are not missed.
- *WRRB Recommendations #2B, 3B, 5B, 19B and 20B-2016* – Comprehensive Tìchq Knowledge studies are crucial to understand the holistic nature of the relationships between wildlife and with Tìchq communities.

The WRRB looks forward to continuing conversations with TG and GNWT and collaborating on implementation of the Kòk'èti ekwò management and monitoring actions. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call our office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph Judas". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Joseph" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Judas".

Joseph Judas
Chair

Attachment; 1

Cc Tammy Steinwand-Deschambeault, Director
Culture and Lands Protection, Tłıchǫ Government

Dr. Erin Kelly, Deputy Minister
Environment and Natural Resources, Government of the Northwest Territories

2016 & 2019 WRRB Recommendations to be Implemented

WRRB Recommendation #12-2019 (Kòk'èti Ekwò):

To increase public understanding of the need for ðekwò management actions, starting in January 2020, TG and GNWT will:

1. exchange information about Kòk'èti and Sahti ekwò with Tìchò communities, via focus groups and community meetings; and,
2. produce and distribute educational materials, via radio, television, social media, and workshops, to the general public about the reasons for the Kòk'èti and Sahti ekwò population declines and the factors affecting the declines, including emigration.

WRRB Recommendation #14-2019 (Kòk'èti Ekwò):

To better monitor the pregnancy rates of the Kòk'èti ekwò herd, GNWT and TG should implement Kòk'èti ekwò pregnancy monitoring through fecal pellet collection in the winter months, every year starting January 2020. To the extent possible, community members should have the opportunity to participate in the collection of fecal pellets on the Kòk'èti ekwò winter range.

WRRB Recommendation #18-2019 (Kòk'èti Ekwò):

To track the progress of implementation of the Board's recommendations, TG and GNWT will provide to the WRRB the following:

1. An implementation plan for the 2019 recommendations by April 30, 2020;
2. A summary report, within one year of the acceptance or variance of the Board's 2019 recommendations, on proposed management actions, including an evaluation of the success of implementation of management actions; and,
3. An updated implementation plan for the 2010 and 2016 recommendations and an evaluation of all outstanding recommendations by April 30, 2020.

Recommendations #2B, 3B, 5B, 19B and 20B-2016:

TG strongly agrees that TK studies are needed. TG, however, wants to combine Recommendations #2B, 3B, 5B, 19B and 20B into a comprehensive TK study. TK is as an all encompassing knowledge and believe it is more useful to combine the topics to understand the larger relationship, instead of focusing on single subjects. Depending on funding, we are aiming to finish this project by September 2018.

Recommendation #2B-2016: The WRRB recommends that TG conduct TK research to define, from the Tìchò perspective, types of ðiga, their behavior and their annual range, and their relationship with ðekwò and people by March 2017.

Recommendation #3B-2016: The WRRB recommends that TG conduct TK research on sahcho predation on ðekwò, and their relationship with ðekwò, other wildlife and people by June 2017.

Recommendation #5B-2016: The WRRB recommends that TG conduct TK research about stress and impacts on ðekwò and people related to collars and aircraft over-flights by September 2017, which should be considered in determining number of collars deployed in 2018 and beyond.

Recommendation #19B-2016: The WRRB recommends TG conduct a TK monitoring project with elders to document how climate conditions have affected preferred summer forage and impacted ðekwò fitness by September 2018.

Recommendation #20B-2016: The WRRB recommends that TG conduct TK monitoring to assess the quality and quantity of winter forage by September 2018.