



Mr. Joseph Judas, Chair  
Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board  
102A, 4504 - 49<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
YELLOWKNIFE NT X1A 1A7

Dear Mr. Judas:

**ENR Final Submission Bluenose-East Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board Hearing April 2019**

The Government of the Northwest Territories Department of Environment and Natural Resources would like to submit the attached written final submission to the Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board's April 2019 Bluenose-East Caribou Herd Proceeding. We look forward to receiving the Board's decisions and recommendations on the proposed management actions.

Bruno Croft, Superintendent  
North Slave Region  
Environment and Natural Resources

c. Dr. Joe Dragon  
Deputy Minister  
Environment and Natural Resources

Ms. Rita Mueller  
Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations  
Environment and Natural Resources

Dr. Brett Elkin  
Director Wildlife  
Environment and Natural Resources

Ms. Laura Duncan  
Tłıchq Executive Officer  
Tłıchq Government

Ms. Tammy Steinwand-Deschambeault  
Director, Culture and Lands Protection  
Tłıchq Government

Mr. Michael Birlea  
Manager, Culture and Lands Protection  
Tłıchq Government

Ms. Jody Pellissey  
Executive Director  
Wek'èezhii Renewable Resources Board

**COPY LIST**

Ms. Laura Duncan  
Tłıchǫ Executive Officer  
Tłıchǫ Government  
[lauraduncan@tlicho.com](mailto:lauraduncan@tlicho.com)

Ms. Tammy Steinwand-Deschambeault  
Director, Culture and Lands Protection  
Tłıchǫ Government  
[TammySteinwand@tlicho.com](mailto:TammySteinwand@tlicho.com)

Mr. Michael Birlea  
Manager, Culture and Lands Protection  
Tłıchǫ Government  
[MichaelBirlea@tlicho.com](mailto:MichaelBirlea@tlicho.com)

Ms. Jody Pellissey  
Executive Director  
Wek'èezhli Renewable Resources Board  
[jpellissey@wrrb.ca](mailto:jpellissey@wrrb.ca)

April 26, 2019

**Government of the Northwest Territories  
Environment and Natural Resources  
Final Written Submission to the WRRB's 2019 Bluenose-East (Sahtì Ekwò)  
Caribou Herd Proceeding**

The following is the final submission of the Government of the Northwest Territories, Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) for the 2019 Bluenose-East (Sahtì Ekwò) (BNE) Caribou Herd Proceeding, following the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board (WRRB) public hearing held in Behchokò April 9-11, 2019.

ENR has also submitted under separate cover a response to undertaking #2 from the WRRB hearing (numbers associated with a graph of projected BNE herd size in 2021) and will shortly submit under separate cover a response to undertaking #1 (a brief report on BNE caribou segment densities from June 2018 and earlier calving ground surveys).

**Joint Management Proposal from TG and ENR**

The Tłìchò Government (TG) and ENR submitted a Joint Proposal on Management Actions for the Bluenose-East (Sahtì Ekwò) Barren-ground Caribou Herd 2019 – 2021 to the WRRB on December 15, 2018. This proposal outlined proposed management actions for the BNE caribou herd in Wek'èezhì, including the establishment of a Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) lower than the previous TAH determined by the WRRB in its 2016 proceedings regarding Management Actions for the BNE Barren-ground caribou. The BNE caribou management proposal was developed collaboratively by the TG and ENR after results of the June 2018 calving ground photographic survey showed the BNE herd had declined by half since 2015, and at an annual rate of decline of about 20%/year since 2010.

We submit that considerable weight should be given to the provisions of this joint proposal that was created on a government to government basis by TG and ENR using both scientific and traditional knowledge, and reflecting the carefully weighed balance between conservation and the recognition of the importance of wildlife, wildlife harvest, and wildlife habitat to the well-being, way of life and land-based economy of Tłìchò and other Indigenous peoples as set out in the Tłìchò Land Claim Agreement.

**Status of the Bluenose-East (Sahtì Ekwò) caribou herd in 2018**

A calving ground photographic survey in June 2018 showed that the total number of breeding cows had declined from an estimated  $17,396 \pm 4,616$  in 2015 to  $11,675 \pm 1,995$  in 2018, a decline of about 32.9%. The adult population estimate fell from  $38,592 \pm 4,733$  in 2015 to  $19,294 \pm 3,230$  – a decline of approximately 50%. In 2010 the herd was estimated at about 120,000 adult caribou.

April 26, 2019

Vital rates for the BNE herd in 2018 suggested that calves were being born at a healthy rate but were not surviving at good rates until fall, and adult survival remained low. The percentage of breeding females in June 2018 was 83%, higher than in 2015. In October 2018 the herd had a ratio of 25 calves: 100 cows, well below the 35-45: 100 expected in a stable herd. The cow survival rate 2015-2018 has ranged between 72 and 78%, well below the 83 – 87% associated with a stable herd. Taken together, these vital rates are consistent with a rapid rate of decline. Unless these vital rates improve substantially, the herd is likely to decline further in the next few years and recovery is uncertain given low productivity over the past few years.

### **Main elements of the Joint Bluenose-East Caribou Management Proposal**

Given the results of the 2018 calving ground photographic survey and the serious state of decline of the BNE herd, TG and ENR collaboratively developed a joint management proposal to try to help reverse the BNE herd's decline and promote an increase in the number of breeding females in the herd. The proposal includes a number of actions to be undertaken between July 1, 2019 and July 1, 2021, and have the full support of both governments. The next population survey for the BNE herd will be done in June 2020, and management actions will be re-assessed thereafter. Management actions will be evaluated annually and may need to be adapted as new information becomes available.

The approach taken in the proposal was designed to be consistent with the 2014 *Taking Care of Caribou Plan*, which was developed by a group of co-management boards (Advisory Committee for Cooperation on Wildlife Management, ACCWM) and includes plans for the Cape Bathurst, Bluenose-West and BNE herds. Proposed monitoring and management are listed under 5 main sections: (1) Harvest, (2) Predators, (3) Habitat and Land Use, (4) Education, and (5) Research and Monitoring. A brief summary of these sections follows below.

#### **1. Harvest**

Hunter harvest is one of the factors directly affecting caribou mortality rates that can be controlled. It is unlikely that harvest is one of the main drivers of overall caribou cycles or long-term fluctuations in caribou numbers; these cycles or fluctuations occur with or without substantial hunter harvest. However, harvest can become a significant contributor to decline in a herd if the harvest is large relative to herd size, if it is largely made up of breeding cows, and if the herd has an underlying declining natural trend. Reported harvest in the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 harvest seasons totaled an estimated 373 and 323 caribou, respectively. These totals are well below the harvest limits established in the Sahtú, Nunavut and Wek'èezhìi land claim areas in 2016. This level of harvest did not likely contribute significantly to the herd's decline from 2015 to 2018. With the BNE herd's currently reduced and rapidly declining population size, harvest should be conservative so that it does not contribute significantly to further decline.

April 26, 2019

To help slow the decline of the BNE herd and promote its recovery, TG and ENR recommend limiting harvest of BNE caribou to a TAH of 300 caribou herd-wide, with all harvest to be bulls and focused on younger, smaller bulls. In 2016 the WRRB determined a TAH of 750 bulls for Wek'èezhìi and recommended that this be the total harvest on a herd-wide basis. The new proposed TAH of 300 for 2019-2021 supports protection of the herd while still allowing for an Indigenous subsistence harvest, and is consistent with the requirements of Section 12.6.3 of the Tłìchq Land Claim Agreement. This recommendation will continue to be reviewed annually with Indigenous governments and organizations and the relevant renewable resources boards and revised if appropriate, based on any new information, consistent with the provisions of the Tłìchq Land Claim Agreement. This harvest is approximately 1.6% of the estimated herd size in 2018. This recommendation is consistent with the 2014 management plan for the BNE herd. The herd is considered to be in the red phase (low numbers, below 20,000) as of 2018, thus harvest should be reduced compared to the TAH established in 2016, when the herd was in the orange phase (declining and at an intermediate size).

The allocation formula for distributing BNE caribou between user groups is dependent on the outcomes of the SRRB, WRRB and Nunavut wildlife management proceedings and may change over time, but the allocation proposed for the harvest in the NWT is 193 caribou: Tłìchq 118 (39.33%), Sahtú 52 (17.29%), Dehcho 5 (1.60%), Inuvialuit 2 (0.80%), NWT Métis Nation [NWTMN] 5 (1.47%), Akaitcho 6 (2.13%), and North Slave Métis Alliance [NSMA] 5 (1.73%). While the TG and ENR have no jurisdiction in Nunavut, the suggested allocation for Nunavut in the joint proposal is 107 (35.73%). This approach to allocation continues to be consistent with the approach that has been used since 2016.

ENR will continue to work with the Délìne Renewable Resources Council and the Sahtú Renewable Resources Board in the Sahtú, and with relevant authorities in Nunavut, towards a consistent approach to harvest management of this herd. TG and ENR acknowledge the leadership shown by the communities of Délìne and Kugluktuk in 2016 in developing and implementing community-based caribou conservation plans for BNE caribou in their respective regions.

Additional effort will be put into promoting respect for caribou, including hunter education on sound hunting practices, including limiting wounding losses and eliminating wastage, promoting reliable harvest reporting, and increased public education on the status and management of caribou herds.

## 2. Predators

Predators are one factor directly affecting caribou mortality rates that can be managed. Previous efforts to increase the annual harvest of wolves on barren-ground caribou winter ranges in the NWT through incentives to wolf hunters and trappers have had limited success since 2010. ENR in early 2019 revised its

April 26, 2019

incentives to wolf harvesters in an area in the North Slave region of the NWT defined by wintering Bathurst and BNE caribou. Harvesters, including resident hunters, are able to access an enhanced wolf harvesting incentive program. This program provides a range of potential incentives to wolf harvesters: \$900 for an intact wolf carcass with fur on and no preparation of the pelt; an additional \$400 for the wolf carcass and pelt prepared to traditional standards (to a total of \$1,300); or an additional \$750 for the wolf carcass and pelt prepared to taxidermy standards with a prime fur bonus (to a maximum of \$1,650).

We have heard from our co-management partners about the importance of involving communities in a meaningful way to develop an approach to predators that is respectful, ethical, and effective. TG and ENR have proposed a collaborative community-based wolf harvesting pilot project for Tłı̄ch̄o communities based on recommendations from Tłı̄ch̄o elders. Selected Tłı̄ch̄o citizens will be trained by experts (an expert in wolf hunting and trapping, a taxidermy/skinning expert, and a Tłı̄ch̄o elder) in field techniques for hunting/trapping wolves, skinning, and fur preparation.

In addition to the increased ENR wolf harvest incentives and training of Tłı̄ch̄o wolf hunters, ENR and TG are developing a joint management proposal for wolf management that will be submitted to the WRRB, reflecting the urgency in addressing the continued rapid decline in the BNE and Bathurst herds. ENR is committed to continue to work collaboratively with the Government of Nunavut and other co-management partners in Nunavut on shared caribou herd management, including predator management.

### 3. Habitat and Land Use

Community participants have stressed at many meetings that recovery of caribou herds will depend on healthy habitat that provides for caribou needs throughout the year. For the BNE herd, recommendations in the *Taking Care of Caribou Plan* will serve as an overall guide to habitat management. Promoting conservation of key habitats for BNE caribou including calving grounds, ekwò no'oke (water crossings), tataa (land crossings) and core ranges used by herds at low numbers is an important part of habitat management. To date, the scale of development activities (including mines, exploration camps and roads) on the BNE range has been limited. Environmental assessment processes in NWT and Nunavut, along with land use planning processes in both territories, will be key processes to promote and conserve healthy habitat for the BNE herd.

### 4. Education

Public education will continue to be important so that communities, harvesters and the general public understand the difficult situation our caribou herds are in, and the actions being taken to promote recovery. ENR recognizes the value of traditional on-the-land monitoring programs like the Tłı̄ch̄o Boots on the Ground program.

April 26, 2019

Hunter education will continue to be important to promote respect for caribou, reduce wounding losses and wastage, and promote harvest of younger, smaller bulls. ENR will work with its co-management partners to continue to support and enhance public education and information through a range of media and forums, including community meetings, to increase information sharing, knowledge and understanding.

### 5. Monitoring and Research

Biological monitoring of the BNE herd proposed for 2019-2021 will enhance the current frequency of surveys and number of satellite radio-collars on the BNE herd.

Proposed monitoring will include:

1. Calving photo surveys to estimate the numbers of breeding females and overall herd size at 2-year intervals (previously 3 years).
2. Annual composition surveys in June, October and March/April to assess initial calf productivity and calf survival to fall and late winter. Previously the June and October surveys had been carried out once every 2-3 years and the late-winter surveys were approximately annual.
3. Condition assessment of harvested caribou to give us an idea of the health and condition that caribou are in each year.
4. Increased satellite collar numbers on the BNE herd to 50 on cows and 20 on bulls (a total 70, up from a current total of 50). This will assist in the annual assessment of cow survival rates, monitoring caribou movement, and planning and conducting surveys.
5. Complete and accurate harvest reporting from all harvesters.
6. Increased research on factors that may be driving population declines, using both scientific and Traditional Knowledge methods. This includes increased support from ENR's On-The-Land Unit for monitoring programs like the Tłıchǵ Boots on the Ground summer monitoring program, which may be expanded from the Bathurst summer range (to date) to the BNE summer range.

The increased monitoring and research will enable ENR and TG to more closely monitor the herd's size, trend and vital rates. Increased research on factors affecting herd trend may help explain why some herds like the BNE continue to decline while others (e.g. Porcupine) are increasing, and provide a greater understanding of the effects of climate change on caribou.

### **What we heard during the public hearing**

- During the Bluenose-East Caribou Public Hearings of April 9-11, 2019, ENR staff heard a number of comments from the public, interveners, board

April 26, 2019

members, staff, and technical experts with respect to the Joint Management Proposal, and other factors affecting the BNE herd. Some of the key points are highlighted below.

### **Importance of maintaining caribou harvest for Indigenous cultures**

- Caribou are an important source of food for many Indigenous people in the Northwest Territories, and a highly valued cultural keystone species. Restrictions on caribou harvesting opportunities impact people who have harvested and relied on caribou as an important traditional food. They also restrict the ability of people to engage in traditional activities that allow Traditional Knowledge to be passed on from one generation to the next.

ENR recognizes that limiting harvest on the BNE herd will cause hardship to some communities. During the public hearing, Tłı̄ch̄ elders and others spoke about the importance of caribou, not only as a source of food but also as an important means of keeping culture and language alive. These are important values and we all need to work together to find ways to protect Indigenous culture, language, and way of life while allowing the BNE herd to recover.

While the proposed annual harvest of 300 bulls from a herd with a rapidly declining natural trend does increase the likelihood of further decline to a limited extent, it also maintains some caribou harvesting opportunities for Tłı̄ch̄, Sahtú and other traditional users and communities.

ENR has committed to helping accommodate Indigenous governments and organizations that need to shift their harvest to other herds and other species, keeping in mind that those sources of food must also be protected from excess harvest pressure.

### **Predator management**

- During the public hearing, concerns were raised about the role of predators in the BNE herd decline, and limited effects of past wolf harvest incentives in increasing wolf harvest levels. A February 6, 2019 letter from the WRRB to TG and ENR on predator management stressed the urgency of a more comprehensive program to reduce wolf numbers to a point where caribou calf and adult survival rates are demonstrably increased from their recent low rates.

ENR recognizes the urgency of the situation and has implemented an enhanced North Slave wolf harvest incentive program that provides increased incentives to wolf harvesters. ENR is also working with TG to develop a wolf management proposal to be submitted to the WRRB.

April 26, 2019

## **Development and maintaining healthy habitat**

- During the public hearing there were a number of questions about development activities and what was being done to protect important habitats for the BNE herd.

The Joint Management Proposal outlines short-term actions to be taken between 2019 and 2021 to help the BNE herd recover, and to promote an increase in the number of breeding females in the herd. However, the Joint Management Proposal is only one piece in the overall management context for BNE caribou. The ACCWM plan *Taking Care of Caribou* recognizes the importance of maintaining healthy habitats for the BNE herd.

There are currently no active mines on the BNE range in the NWT or Nunavut, although there has been mineral exploration activity on the BNE calving grounds in Nunavut. The GNWT participates in all environmental assessment (EA) processes in the NWT, and those EAs in Nunavut for developments that may affect trans-boundary caribou herds like the BNE. ENR also participated in meetings held in 2015-2019 by the Nunavut Land Use Planning Commission and the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board focused on caribou habitat protection.

ENR will continue to participate in these processes to share information on the BNE herd and the importance of protecting sensitive calving and post-calving areas. Land use planning processes in the NWT (e.g. Tłı̄ch̄o and Sahtú land use plans) can also provide opportunities to manage and conserve important caribou habitat. As an example, the Edaǰǰla (Caribou Point) area protects caribou range that is often used for more than half the year by BNE caribou.

In response to comments at many community meetings, ENR has recognized that healthy winter range is also important for caribou. ENR has initiated a process of working with communities to identify key unburned areas of caribou winter range, which can be considered in the GNWT's Values at Risk approach to forest fire management.

## **Community outreach, education and involvement**

- Throughout the public hearing, we heard about the importance of working together and involving communities in a meaningful way in protecting and supporting the recovery of our caribou herds.

Caribou are a shared resource, and a shared responsibility. ENR works closely with Indigenous governments and organizations, renewable resources boards and other co-management partners to support the conservation and recovery of the BNE and other barren-ground caribou herds. We have heard many people speak passionately about wanting to help support recovery of the BNE herd, and by

April 26, 2019

working together we are most likely to effectively implement management actions. All parties bring something to the table, and by working together and sharing information in an open and respectful way, stronger decisions can be made to help the BNE caribou long-term.

## **Conclusion**

The current status of the BNE herd is of serious concern. Timely conservation-based management actions are needed to help the BNE herd recover so that it can once again provide sustainable harvests that meet the needs of traditional users and communities. Building on their collaborative approach, the TG and ENR have jointly put forward a management proposal to help the BNE herd recover with a range of different actions that we believe are necessary, and which restrict the exercise of Indigenous rights to the least extent possible while still addressing the need for conservation. ENR looks forward to the WRRB's decisions and recommendations.