



Mr. Joseph Judas, Chair
Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board
4504 49TH AVENUE
YELLOWKNIFE NT X1A 1A7
jjudas@wrrb.ca

October 18, 2024

Dear Mr. Judas:

Final Written Arguments for the 2024 Sahtì Ekwò Management Proceeding

The Tłıchǫ Government (TG) and the Government of the Northwest Territories Department of Environment and Climate Change (GNWT) would like to extend thanks to the Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board (WRRB) for their consideration of the *Joint Proposal on Management Actions for the Bluenose-East Barren-ground caribou (Sahtì ekwò) Herd 2024-2026* and to the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB) for their contributions to the 2024 Sahtì Ekwò Management Proceeding.

The TG and the GNWT are committed to working together and with all co-management partners across the Northwest Territories (NWT) and Nunavut to support the continued growth, recovery, and sustainable use of Sahtì ekwò. Population surveys and demographic monitoring combined with on-the-ground observations by TG's Ekwò Nàxoèdee K'è caribou monitoring program and the Kugluktuk Hunters and Trappers Organization have brought good news for Sahtì ekwò in recent years. GNWT's 2023 herd estimate was 39,500 representing a significant increase in herd size from 2018 and 2021, and demographic indicators (e.g., calf:cow ratios and collar-based cow survival) have also trended upward over the same time period. On-the-ground observations have found calves and adult males and females to be in good to excellent condition, and there have been high proportions of calves, yearlings, and young bulls and cows in the herd.

Given these positive indicators for Sahtì ekwò, the TG and the GNWT proposed an increase in the total allowable harvest (TAH) of Sahtì ekwò in Wek'èezhìi to 395 (bull-only). We believe this TAH will help to meet the needs of Indigenous communities who harvest in Wek'èezhìi while also allowing for continued herd growth. Tłıchǫ Government's Chief Executive Council gave direction to request an increase in the TAH within Wek'èezhìi for the Sahtì ekwò to enable traditional hunting practices such as fall hunts in the barrenlands which have not occurred since 2012. This gap in traditional hunting practices has led to a significant detachment of the younger generation from their cultural roots.

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Hozìi ekwò (barren-ground caribou) and Tłıchǫ cultural identity

An increase in the TAH would provide Tłıchǫ people, and especially youth, with the opportunity to organize and experience caribou harvesting on the barrenlands in fall – the prime season for hides and fat bulls. Given that the last fall hunt took place on the barrenlands in 2012, over 12 years has passed since Tłıchǫ have engaged in the important tradition of harvesting ekwò on the barrenlands during the fall season. Since this cultural practice has not taken place for over a decade, most Tłıchǫ youth growing up today have had few opportunities to travel to the ancestral harvesting locations to reconnect to cultural places and ekwò. Consistent with arguments and presentations Tłıchǫ Government has made in WRRB hearings and procedures, maintaining the Tłıchǫ connection with caribou is central for the Tłıchǫ cultural identity and equally important, it is a way to sustain identity for the new generation of Tłıchǫ growing up today, to also experience and benefit from the harvesting practices and elders’ teachings while hunting caribou on the barrenlands.

To help address this negative trend, a group of Tłıchǫ paddled canoes, in August 2024, along the ancient trail to the caribou harvesting locations on the barrenlands and ultimately reached the large lake Deèzàatì (Point Lake) after 16 days. The purpose of the trip was to revive and relive the old trail used by elders to find caribou. The fact that this was the first time anyone travelled this trail since the 1960s underscores the desire to reconnect to the land and the cultural ways of connecting to caribou. During the last days of the long trip, one Sahtì ekwò bull was harvested, which was the first time in 12 years that Tłıchǫ have harvested a bull caribou in the fall. The youth that was fortunate to participate on this hunt was able to carry the fat caribou meat into our small camp located on a tall esker overlooking Deèzàatì; an act that brought out memories and knowledge from past hunts, ancient cultural practices and traditions, and creating a unique sense of belonging and happiness among the people.



Youth Jerrick Camsell with elder Joe Zoe in August 2024 holding the hide of the first Sahtì ekwò harvested during the fall season in 12 years (photo by P. Jacobsen)

The photo above shows the outcomes of a transformative journey undertaken in August 2024 by Tłı̨chǫ individuals who traveled the trails to traditional caribou harvesting locations used up until the 1960s. This journey, culminating in the successful harvest of a Sahti ekwò bull, symbolized a revival of traditional practices. It is highlighted that this was "the first time Tłı̨chǫ had harvested a bull caribou in the fall for over 12 years," emphasizing the long-standing gap in these crucial cultural practices and the transmission of knowledge related to a fall harvest.

This cultural practice of travelling to the barrenlands to harvest caribou serves as an opportunity that maintains Tłı̨chǫ relationship with the land and animals, because "our relationship with ekwò defines who we are. It's a foundation for our nàowo – a Tłı̨chǫ concept that encompasses our language, culture, way of life, as well as our knowledge and laws" (Zoe 2012). The ability to continue caribou harvesting is not only about hunting; but more importantly, the knowledge and cultural practice of harvesting entails a purpose in life and a cultural tradition carried on from Tłı̨chǫ ancestors that must be sustained.

During the last WRRB public hearing on Bluenose-East caribou in 2019, the Director of Department of Culture and Lands Protection, Tammy Steinwand-Deschambeault, reminded us of the meaning of caribou for the people:

We have always lived in harmony with the caribou. We need to continue that relationship. Tłı̨chǫ rely on Ekwò for our physical, spiritual, cultural sustenance. We have heard from our Elders that the Creator gave us caribou as a gift, and the gift that we believe will be with us.

Chief Mowfi's declaration when he signed Treaty 11 in 1921, nearly one hundred (100) years ago: As long as the sun rises, the river flows and the land does not move, we will not be restricted from our way of life. If our wise, late Tłı̨chǫ's Chief's words are ignored and we are subject to a complete ban from harvesting the Sahti Ekwò, we lose more than the meat.

We lose our traditional way of life. Our identity as an Indigenous people very closely connected to the land is threatened. Mental health and wellness in our Elders will be affected. Our Elders will no longer be able to eat the food they love, the food they grew up on, the food that feeds their soul. Mental health and wellness will be affected in our harvesters, who no longer will be able to provide for their family and community. Mental health and wellness will be affected in our women, who will no longer be able to contribute to the family by sharing the teachings of working on hides, making clothing, and preparing the meat for a shared meal. Our youth will be missing out on traditions and teachings that have been passed down for generation after generation. If we have no caribou to harvest, what will fill that void? What can fill that void with something as precious as caribou? There is nothing.

Tammy Steinwand-Deschambeault, April 9th 2019, WRRB Hearing Day 1 pp:123-124

For many years, Tłı̄chǫ have made the communal sacrifice of not harvesting the Kòk'èetì ekwò and a limited harvest of the Sahtì ekwò; while recognizing the necessity of making these sacrifices to protect and allow the herds to recover. As we start to see positive signs in the herd abundance, the Tłı̄chǫ chiefs see the desire for a small increase in sustainable harvesting opportunities, which could allow more Tłı̄chǫ and most importantly, more youth, the opportunity to travel to the barrenlands to experience the cultural practices and teachings of harvesting the Sahtì ekwò.

Monitoring of Sahtì ekwò

The TG and the GNWT propose a small and incremental increase in sustainable harvesting of the Sahtì ekwò, as well a strong commitment to continue our monitoring efforts as outlined in the joint proposal. Since 2020, TG has run the Ekwò Nàxoèhdee K'è program at Deèzàatì, monitoring Sahtì ekwò and its habitat during fall. We plan to continue our program at Deèzàatì, bringing Tłı̄chǫ people to Sahtì ekwò's fall range to monitor the herd. Additionally, TG will continue to hire a community monitor in Wekweèti to monitor Sahtì ekwò and its habitat while the herd is around Wekweèti during winter months. As the joint management proposal asks for an increase in harvesting, at the same time the TG and the GNWT also consider the need to continue our monitoring efforts of the Sahtì ekwò.

The TG and the GNWT's commitment to ongoing monitoring of the caribou populations helps us to ensure that increased harvesting is balanced with sustainable conservation practices, addressing both cultural needs and ecological responsibilities. Overall, the request advocates for the preservation of a way of life that is at the core of Tłı̄chǫ identity, stressing the need for a balanced approach that respects both cultural traditions and environmental stewardship.


While there is some uncertainty about how fast Sahtì ekwò are increasing, scientific and community observations both indicate that the herd is healthy and increasing. Further, harvest modeling by GNWT suggests that, even at lower rates of herd increase (5% per year), a combined TAH of 845 (i.e., ~2.1% of the recent herd estimate) in the NWT and Nunavut (395 for NWT harvester groups [bull-only] plus 450 [bull or cow] for Kugluktuk) would allow for continued herd growth. Importantly, TG and GNWT remain committed to monitoring Sahtì ekwò and to sharing that information with other NWT harvester groups and Kugluktuk through Annual Status Meetings of the Advisory Committee for Cooperative Wildlife Management and other forums. In this way, the TG, the GNWT, and all co-management partners can remain adaptive and responsive to changes in the trend and condition of Sahtì ekwò.

The TG and GNWT again thank the WRRB and the NWMB for their contributions to the 2024 Sahti Ekwò Management Proceeding and we look forward to receiving WRRB's final determination and recommendations.

Sincerely,



Tammy Steinwand-Deschambeault
Director, Department of Culture and Lands Protection
Tłıchǫ Government
tammy.steinwand@tlicho.ca



Heather Sayine-Crawford
Director, Wildlife Management Division
Environment and Climate Change
Government of the Northwest Territories
heather_sayine-crawford@gov.nt.ca