

May 27, 2022

Grand Chief Jackson Lafferty
Tłchq 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 Sahti (Bluenose-East) Ekwò Herd

Dear Grand Chief Lafferty and Minister Thompson:

As per section 12.5.1 of the Tłchq Agreement, the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board (WRRB) considered the above-mentioned proposal, submitted by the Tłchq 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 goal of the joint management proposal is to promote conditions that will allow for the continued recovery of the Sahti Ekwò herd while working towards the longer-term goal of enabling a sustainable caribou harvest that meets the needs of Indigenous communities across the Sahti 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 for this matter 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 approved after the WRRB's 2019 Bluenose-East Caribou Proceeding as follows:

- *Harvest Management* – The total allowable harvest and harvest management actions remain unchanged, including continued expansion and implementation of the Tłchq Ekwò Harvest Monitoring Program.
- *Predator Management* – Predator management actions remain unchanged.
- *Habitat & Land Use* – No new habitat or land use management actions are proposed.
- *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 and management actions are unchanged except for the addition of a 2023 July composition survey.

The composition survey in July 2023 is proposed on a one-time basis to assess early calf mortality when calving ground predation may be significant. However, the WRRB questions TG and GNWT's evidence and technical rationale for this proposed survey. The rationale provided in the joint management proposal suggested an apparent low calf survival during a July 2020 Sahti Ekwò composition survey; however, interpretation was limited as the pregnancy rate was not estimated. Given annual variation in pregnancy rates, their estimation is an essential first step in describing early calf mortality. In this context, the WRRB reiterates its Recommendation #11-2019 (Sahti Ekwò), which is to implement a fecal pellet monitoring program while recognizing that there are other approaches to index pregnancy rates.

WRRB Recommendation #1-2022 (Sahti Ekwò) – TG and GNWT will apply at least one method of estimating pregnancy rate in 2023, prior to the Sahti Ekwò calving season, in order to interpret calf survival during a July 2023 composition survey.

The WRRB notes that gaps in monitoring and knowledge may impair future management decisions. The proposed 2023 estimate of Sahti Ekwò herd size and the calf survival estimates raise questions about updating monitoring design. Although the 2021 herd size estimate was relatively precise, the calving ground survey report does not describe if and how statistical power can be increased to detect trends, specifically for recovering herds. Additionally, the sex and age composition reports do not describe analyses to determine sampling strategies to trade-off the number of groups sampled to reach a certain level of precision while respecting the senior Tłchq elder's approach to leaving caribou alone. There is also a need to consider how a change in age structure associated with a recovering herd will impact the design and interpretation of monitoring in Sahti Ekwò herd. Ongoing technical discussions amongst the co-management partners is critical for monitoring and management of the Sahti Ekwò herd.

WRRB Recommendation #2-2022 (Sahti Ekwò) – TG and GNWT will come prepared to attend a technical workshop and discuss technical monitoring questions, including statistical power for calving ground surveys, sample size for sex and age composition surveys and the impact of a changing age structure. WRRB will organize and hold this technical workshop during the summer 2022 with invitations to members of the Barren-ground Caribou Technical Working Group (BGCTWG), Government of Nunavut, and statistical support, as necessary.

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. Given that pregnancy rates, the rate of predator sightings, and environmental conditions, such as snow melt and the onset of plant growth, all vary annually, the WRRB is uncertain as to what is gained by a one-year assessment of calf mortality.

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 Sahti Ekwò herd.

WRRB Recommendation #3-2022 (Sahti 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 Sahti 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.

In the Bathurst Caribou Range Plan, one of the seven management tools to mitigate caribou and habitat disturbance is habitat conservation. Preserving and respecting the integrity of important habitats allows for the continued use by ʔekwò. Habitat conservation is proposed for sensitive ʔekwò habitat as well as in areas to ensure range connectivity. Currently, Indigenous groups across the range of the Kòk’èeti Ekwò herd are working to determine how best to define, prioritize, and protect areas for conservation, using appropriate legislative tools, that are important to ʔekwò, including water crossings, land bridges, and habitat affected by fire. Proactively monitoring and managing Sahti Ekwò habitat is crucial for the recovery of the herd.

WRRB Recommendation #4-2022 (Sahti Ekwò) – TG and GNWT will expand ongoing Kòk’èeti Ekwò habitat conservation work to include the Sahti Ekwò herd range, beginning in 2022.

Public understanding about the reasons for the Sahti Ekwò population declines and the factors affecting the declines, including emigration, and the need for ʔekwò management actions is imperative given the relationship between T̄hçq communities and ʔekwò.

WRRB Recommendation #5-2022 (Sahti 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 T̄hçq 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 #7-2019 (Sahti Ekwò)* – Legally enforceable habitat protection measures will ensure that practical recommendations identified by T̄hçq communities to minimize disturbance or protect important areas for ʔekwò are implemented.
- *WRRB Recommendation #11-2019 (Sahti Ekwò)* – Fecal pellet collection on the Sahti Ekwò winter range allows for an increased sample size and, therefore, a more representative pregnancy rate.
- *WRRB Recommendations #2B, 3B, 5B, 19B and 20B-2016* – Comprehensive T̄hçq Knowledge studies are crucial to understand the holistic nature of the relationships between wildlife and with T̄hçq communities.

The WRRB looks forward to continuing conversations with TG and GNWT and collaborating on implementation of the Sahtì 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

Recommendation #7-2019 (Sahti Ekwò):

Following identification of high priority habitat for Sahti Ekwò, and to ensure this habitat remains intact, legally enforceable habitat protection measures should be explored by GNWT under the Wildlife Act or Species at Risk Act (NWT). In addition, GNWT will explore a pilot project to test Mobile Caribou Conservation Measures.

Recommendation #11-2019 (Sahti Ekwò):

To better understand the health of the Sahti Ekwò herd, GNWT and TG should continue to explore Sahti Ekwò pregnancy monitoring through fecal pellet collection in the winter months, starting in March 2020 during a late-winter composition survey by helicopter. Methodology for this program may include community-based sampling.

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 Tłı̄ch̄o perspective, types of dı̄ga, their behavior and their annual range, and their relationship with ʔekwò and people by March 2017.

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

Recommendation #5B-2016: The WRRB recommends that TG conduct TK research about stress and impacts on ʔekwò 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 ʔekwò 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.