

Barren-ground Caribou Management Strategy and Interim Measures

Hon. J. Michael Miltenberger

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Statement to the Legislative Assembly

Mr. Speaker, evidence from traditional and scientific sources show that barren-ground caribou herds are declining across much of North America. Barren-ground caribou, like other species, follow cyclical population patterns. Factors such as climate change, predation, hunting, development, disease and fire can impact these cycles. Recent surveys show herd declines ranging from 40 percent in some herds to as high as 86 percent in others.

Given this trend, the Government of the Northwest Territories, along with co-management boards and harvesters, must act in the best interests of preserving our barren-ground caribou populations.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources is responsible for the conservation and protection of our environment and natural resources. To achieve this objective, the Department uses the best information available. When wildlife population trends suggest there is a serious concern, the Department applies the "Precautionary Principle". This means that management decisions shall err on the side of caution. We know that caribou numbers are declining and we must take reasonable conservation measures now to prevent serious or irreparable damage to this resource. The actions we take over the next five years will have a profound impact on the recovery of barren-ground caribou. Our first step will be to institute interim management measures aimed at reducing harvest levels. The second phase will involve further information gathering on caribou numbers, predation levels and subsistence harvest counts. To guide our actions, the Department has developed a Northwest Territories Barren-Ground Caribou Management Strategy 2006-2010. The Strategy will steer our work in this area through the coming years. Later today, I will table a copy of this document and look forward to receiving feedback on the activities and plans it outlines.

Mr. Speaker, as a result of the Bathurst Caribou Management Plan and recent herd surveys, we have, over the past year, been meeting with groups to talk about caribou management. In addition to meetings with the Inuvialuit, Sahtu and Gwich'in Co-management Boards, we discussed the declining caribou numbers with leaders from the Tlicho, Yellowknives Dene, Dene Nation, Northwest Territory Métis Nation, barren-ground outfitters as well as representatives from the adjacent jurisdictions of Nunavut, Yukon, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

The first interim step is to reduce harvest levels. To meet this goal, a number of immediate actions will be applied across the Northwest Territories in the next six months. These include:

- developing a major public education campaign, including television, radio and print media;
- increasing monitoring and enforcement patrols;
- reducing caribou tags for resident harvesters from five to two;
- allowing resident harvesters to hunt bulls only;
- establishing a new management zone for the Cape Bathurst herd;
- delaying the public release of maps showing the locations of satellite collared caribou by two weeks; and
- investigating ways to mitigate impacts on harvesters.

Other immediate actions will be herd-specific and will include reductions to resident and commercial harvests recommended by co-management boards. Caribou tags for outfitters on the Bathurst fall range will return to 1999 levels. This will be done over a two-year period and reductions during the first year will only involve those tags that go unused. In addition, wolf tags for non-resident harvesters will be increased from one to two; and voluntary harvest limits proposed by the co-management boards will be accepted.

These changes will not happen overnight, Mr. Speaker. A number of the actions planned will require amendments to regulations. It is our intention to work with our partners to make the required changes as quickly as possible and we will notify the public through media announcements as these changes come into force. As I mentioned earlier Mr. Speaker, these interim measures are the first step. Over the spring and summer months, we plan on gathering up-to-date herd information and will be conducting a study on caribou predation. Once this information has been collected, we will consult with our partners and stakeholders, reassess our position and will work with co-management boards to develop the longer-term steps necessary to ensure healthy and sustainable caribou herds for today and the future.

Thank you.