

NWT Caribou Conservation Measures

Hon. J. Michael Miltenberger

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Statement to the Legislative Assembly

Mr. Speaker, for the last four years Environment and Natural Resources has been working with wildlife co-management boards, Aboriginal governments and organizations, communities and user groups, to share information on declining barren-ground caribou herds and develop and implement conservation measures. These have been very difficult decisions but there has been a willingness to work together so that this valuable resource can be sustained for future generations.

As Members are aware, the GNWT, through the NWT Act, has a responsibility to manage game in the NWT. In implementing conservation actions, our Government recognizes and respects aboriginal harvesting rights as set out in land claim agreements and treaties and as protected by the Canadian Constitution. The emergency measures implemented January 1st are intended to ensure the long-term survival of caribou herds so that these rights can indeed be exercised by current and future generations.

I would like to inform Members what has been accomplished by working together and what remains to be done to conserve caribou in the NWT. Mr. Speaker, caribou numbers cycle over time and both traditional and scientific knowledge have documented these changes. Many factors influence these cycles but there are only a few factors that humans can control. Mr. Speaker, I must stress when caribou numbers are low, the level of harvest will influence the rate of recovery.

In 2005 and 2006 surveys to obtain new estimates of the Cape Bathurst, Bluenose-West, Bluenose-East and Bathurst caribou herds indicated these herds were all in serious decline.

After the 2005 surveys the Inuvialuit, Gwich'in and Sahtu wildlife co-management boards recommended that all resident and outfitted hunting for barren-ground caribou from the Cape Bathurst, Bluenose-West and Bluenose-East cease in their regions. These regulation changes were made in 2006.

After the 2006 surveys the Inuvialuit Wildlife Management Advisory Council (NWT) recommended that all hunting of the Cape Bathurst herd cease. For the Bluenose-West herd, the Inuvialuit, Gwich'in and Sahtu wildlife co-management boards recommended that a total allowable harvest be established at four percent of the 2006 herd estimate. This meant a total of 720 tags. The boards had previously developed a formula based

on historic harvest to allocate any quota among the three regions. These were implemented in 2007 and 2009.

The good news in 2009 was when new estimates of the Cape Bathurst and Bluenose-West herds were obtained, this data showed that management actions, in combination with good calf survival, had stopped the herds from declining further.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the other herds in the Northwest Territories. In 2006 the Bluenose-East herd numbered around 66,000 and the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board recommended that hunters should work towards a voluntary total allowable harvest of 4 percent. In 2009 weather prevented completion of a survey to update Bluenose East herd's estimates. However, there are no indications to suggest this herd has increased.

The Ahiak herd, which is shared with Nunavut and Saskatchewan, has also declined. For the past four years surveys to delineate the calving area have been undertaken and a trend analysis shows a 60 percent decline over the four years.

Unfortunately, weather this past year did not allow for a full survey of the Porcupine herd. Despite this, the GNWT continues to work with the parties to the Porcupine Caribou Management Agreement on the development of a long-term harvest management plan.

In 1994 survey results indicated that the Beverly herd was estimated at 276,000.

Systemic reconnaissance surveys of the Beverly calving grounds in 2007, 2008 and 2009 indicate that the Beverly herd has all but disappeared. Limited collar information suggests that some of the last Beverly cows have shifted to the range of the much larger Ahiak herd.

However, our gravest and most immediate concern today is for the Bathurst herd, which ranges between Great Slave Lake and Bathurst Inlet. The 2009 survey showed a drastic decline to 32,000 caribou from over 100,000 in 2006. In the 1980s this herd numbered well over 400,000 animals. Small steps were taken in 2007 to reduce both the resident and outfitted harvest. Resident tags were reduced from five to two and only males could be hunted. The number of outfitter tags was reduced from 1,500 to 750.

The Department had submitted a proposal for management actions through the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board to keep harvests below four percent of the herd estimate. However, significant public controversy prevented further action. To address these concerns, a peer review of territorial caribou studies was undertaken by the Alberta Research Council. The peer review recommended some improvements, but,

overall, outlined that survey methods were sound and that the data indicating declines were occurring was solid.

In accordance with the Tlicho Agreement, the Department and the Tlicho Government submitted a joint proposal for management actions to the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board in November 2009. These actions related to the three caribou herds that spend part of their winters in the Wek'eezhii. Agreement was reached on actions related to resident and outfitted harvests, but there was not agreement on actions related to Aboriginal harvests in Wek'eezhii.

The Department then set up meetings to consult on the joint proposal with communities and user groups in November and December. It was anticipated that recommendations from the board might be received late in 2009, in time to address the winter hunt which is when the majority of caribou are taken. In early December it became apparent that recommendations would not be received until April 2010 and so the Department began to consider the need for interim emergency measures. In mid-December the department met with Aboriginal organizations in the North Slave region to discuss the interim emergency measures and how to address hardships that might result.

On January 1, 2010, the interim emergency measures changes were implemented. These were focused on creating a no-hunting zone where the Bathurst herd was wintering and eliminating resident and outfitted harvests throughout the North and South Slave regions to reduce the pressure on the neighbouring Bluenose East and Ahiak herds.

Radio and print ads were placed in mid-December to inform people. Aerial and land patrols were undertaken. The Tlicho Government has been supportive of these interim measures and the Tlicho communities are accessing financial assistance to undertake community hunts and reconnaissance flights. This has been a very difficult but necessary decision by the Tlicho Government.

The Yellowknives Dene First Nation has also recognized the caribou need help. They were the first to take a leadership role, when they cancelled their fall caribou hunt. The Department continues to meet with the Yellowknives Dene First Nation to address their concerns related to the interim measures.

It is important to note that no rights are absolute. All treaty and Aboriginal rights are subject to government measures to ensure conservation. Where conservation measures actions may affect Aboriginal harvesting rights, ENR is working directly with the Aboriginal governments and organizations to develop solutions that will protect, preserve and ensure the survival of caribou for future generations. It is our responsibility as a government to protect the vulnerable population that without conservation measures may well become extinct in a few short years.

The next step will be the public hearing to be held by the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board on March 22 to 26, 2010. Recommendations are expected by early June and the Department will consult with the Tlicho Government on implementation.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, the Department will take steps to work cooperatively with co-management boards to address overlap issues associated with this valuable resource.

In 2010 surveys will be undertaken to obtain a new estimate for the Bluenose-East and Ahiak herds. These herds are shared by communities from the Kitikmeot, Inuvialuit, Sahtu, Tlicho, North Slave, South Slave and northern Saskatchewan. The Department will work with boards, users and governments to share information and assess management actions.

I look forward to support from Members, Aboriginal governments and our co-management partners as we navigate these challenging waters.

At the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, we are looking for the same thing: a way to help these herds survive so they in turn can help sustain current and future generations. Thank you.