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Survey Results for Bluenose-East Caribou Herd Released

YELLOWKNIFE (November 3, 2010) – Results from the 2010 summer surveys of the Bluenose-East caribou herd indicate the herd has recovered to 2000 levels.

“The new estimate of the size of the herd is 98,600 animals,” said Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) Minister J. Michael Miltenberger. “While the increase in the herd is good news, this herd is shared by many harvesters from many regions and we must still exercise caution when recommending management actions so the herd can continue to increase.”

Two different survey methods were used this summer and both methods provided similar estimates. Comparing these two survey methods responds to a recommendation made by the Alberta Research Council, in its independent review of caribou management in the NWT.

The new estimate of 98,600, plus or minus 7,100 animals, for the Bluenose-East herd is based on the post-calving photographic survey. The last post-calving survey was done in 2006. The calving ground photographic survey estimate is 102,700, plus or minus 40,000 animals.

Observers from Sahtu, Tlicho, Akaitcho and Nunavut communities participated in both surveys.

“The increase is likely due to good calf recruitment since 2006 and reduced harvest pressure on cows since the bulk of the herd did not winter near winter roads or communities for the past four years,” added Minister Miltenberger. “I commend all our partners and harvesters for their on-going actions to help conserve all our barren-ground caribou herds.”

The next steps involve meetings of appropriate wildlife co-management boards and Aboriginal governments in the Dehcho, Sahtu, Inuvialuit, Tlicho regions and Nunavut regions to discuss the harvest target proposed for the Bluenose-East herd by the Wek’èezhìi Renewable Resources Board in its Recommendations Report. They will also determine what harvest limitations, if any, should be recommended to the Minister of ENR and how the harvest limitations would be allocated.

The Government of the Northwest Territories and Tlicho Government will submit their response to the Wek’èezhìi Renewable Resources Board recommendations by the end of December 2010.

Media requests for interviews with Members of the Executive Council may be directed to:

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New Estimate for the Size of the Bluenose-East Herd

- Two different survey methods (post-calving ground survey and calving grounds survey) were used during the summer of 2010 to obtain a new estimate for the size of the Bluenose-East caribou herd.
- The two surveys address the recommendation, made by the Alberta Research Council in its independent review of caribou management in the NWT, to compare these methods.
- The new estimate of 98,600, plus or minus 7,100 animals, for the Bluenose-East herd is based on the post-calving survey. The last post-calving survey was done in 2006.
- The calving ground survey estimate is 102,700, plus or minus 40,000 animals.
- A research paper comparing both survey techniques will be written and undergo a peer review before being released.

Calving Ground Photographic Survey

- During June, the calving grounds are located using collared animals and an extensive reconnaissance survey.
- During the reconnaissance survey observers are in an aircraft flown at 400 feet above the ground to count caribou in transects spaced 10 kilometres apart.
- These counts are used to divide the calving grounds into blocks based on low, medium and high densities. The ratio of breeding cows to calves and non-breeders is determined for each block.
- A photo plane flies predefined transects in the medium and high density blocks and the photos are sent out for counting by an independent observer.
- Once the photos are counted, the number of breeding cows on the calving grounds is estimated. An estimate of the total herd size is derived from the fall sex ratio and an estimated pregnancy rate to account for caribou not on the calving grounds.

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- Conditions for the 2010 survey, the first one done on the herd, were excellent and 8,800 km of survey lines were flown. Observers from Sahtu, Tlicho, Akaitcho and Nunavut communities participated and the estimate from the survey is 102,700, plus or minus 40,000 animals.

Post-Calving Ground Photographic Survey

- During July, post-calving aggregations of caribou are located using collared animals.
- The large groups of animals are photographed, using a photo plane, for counting and estimating the herd size. If additional groups without collars are found, they are also photographed.
- Representatives from the Sahtu, Tlicho, Akaitcho and Nunavut communities participated in a tour of the cow-calf aggregations during the end of 2010 post-calving survey.
- The herd estimate based on the 2010 post-calving ground survey is 98,600, plus or minus 7,100 animals.
- The 2006 estimate for the Bluenose-East was 66,200. The 2000 estimate was 104,000 animals. Both estimates were based on results of post-calving ground surveys.

Comparison of Survey Techniques

- Difference in survey estimates is low and both results indicate the herd has increased since 2006.
- The increase is likely due to good calf recruitment since 2006 and the reduced harvest pressure on cows as the herd has not wintered near winter roads or communities for the past four years.
- The estimate from the post-calving ground survey maintains consistency with the previous herd estimates.

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Management Next Steps

- The appropriate wildlife co-management boards and Aboriginal governments (Tlicho and Dehcho) will discuss:
 - the harvest target proposed for the Bluenose-East herd by the Wek'èezhii Renewable Resources Board in its Recommendations Report;
 - what harvest limitations, if any, should be recommended to the GNWT; and
 - how the harvest limitations would be allocated.
- The GNWT and Tlicho Government will submit a response to the Wek'èezhii Renewable Resources Board recommendations by the end of December 2010.
- The Advisory Committee for Cooperation on Wildlife Management, consisting of wildlife co-management boards established under the Inuvialuit, Gwich'in, Sahtu, Tlicho and Nunavut land claims agreements, will complete management plans for the Bluenose-East herd, as well as the Bluenose-West and Cape Bathurst herds, by 2011.
- In December 2010, the GNWT will release the 2011-2015 NWT Barren-ground Caribou Management Strategy.

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