

**Barren-Ground Caribou Numbers**

Mr. Speaker, I know you and all the other Members here understand the importance of barren-ground caribou to our communities. Caribou are central to the way of life in the North, and have sustained people here for many generations. This is why together, this Legislative Assembly made a mandate commitment to improve food security in the Northwest Territories through the effective co-management of wildlife, including caribou.

Part of achieving this commitment requires recognizing that caribou are a shared resource and that we need to work with our co-management partners including the federal government, Indigenous governments, regulatory boards, industry and other stakeholders to make shared decisions.

Mr. Speaker, last year the Government of the Northwest Territories carried out population surveys on five of our territory's barren-ground caribou herds: the Cape Bathurst, Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula, Bluenose-West and Bluenose-East, and Bathurst caribou. The results of those surveys were not favourable, and in November I shared the details of those results with Members and the public.

What we learnt, was that while populations of the three northern herds have stayed relatively stable, unfortunately the Bluenose-East and Bathurst caribou herds continue to experience significant declines.

These results were alarming, in that both of these populations have been reduced by half or more over the last three years despite extensive co-management actions between the GNWT and Indigenous governments and renewable resources boards to support barren-ground conservation and promote herd recovery.

Mr. Speaker, we know that these results were concerning to the public and the GNWT shares this concern. We know our communities are struggling without caribou, and that many families have already sacrificed a lot to help the herds recover. As you know, there has been no harvest of Bathurst caribou since 2015, and harvest of the Bluenose-East herd has been significantly reduced. However, the caribou continue to need our help.

In the months since I shared these results with our co-management partners and the public, I have been meeting with Indigenous leaders and affected communities to talk about the low caribou numbers, and hear their ideas for how we can work together to take care of the herds.

I want to particularly thank the Tlicho Leadership who have emphasized the importance of strong collaboration with the GNWT to address this urgent situation. Our two governments have been working very closely together over the past few months to consider what we can do to help support the caribou.

Mr. Speaker, the Department of ENR and myself are committed to meeting with as many of our co-management partners and Indigenous governments as we can to discuss this issue. At the end of January, I travelled with Tłı̨chǫ leadership to Whati, Wekweètì, Gameti and Behchokǫ. I also met with the Chiefs of the Yellowknives Dene, and my officials met with First Nations and Métis leadership in Fort Smith. Earlier this month, ENR also held meetings with Lutsel K'e First Nation and the North Slave Métis Alliance on February 18, 2019.

One of the suggestions we continue to hear at these meetings is that more needs to be done to deal with predators, namely wolves, and I agree. That is why the GNWT has increased the incentives we offer to wolf harvesters in the North Slave region, specifically on the wintering grounds of the Bathurst and Bluenose-East caribou. The enhanced incentive program is meant to encourage harvesters to take more wolves on the ranges of the Bathurst and Bluenose-East caribou. At the same time, we are also looking at what more we

can do together with the Tłı̨chǫ Government to reduce the impacts of predators on caribou populations.

But predators are only part of the picture, Mr. Speaker. For the last few months, the GNWT has been working closely with the Tłı̨chǫ Government to draft two joint management proposals: one for the Bathurst caribou herd and one for the Bluenose-East.

These proposals lay out the actions our two governments are proposing to take to help the herds recover, including harvest management, habitat protection and increased research and monitoring. The proposals also reflect the recommendations in the Bathurst Caribou Range Plan. This Plan is in the final stages of approval and will ensure we are managing activities on the land in a way that supports the recovery of our caribou herds.

Both proposals are now with the Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board for review.

Mr. Speaker, in the Sahtú, the GNWT continues to support a community-based approach to conservation planning for the Bluenose-East caribou herd, centred around Délı̨ne's caribou conservation plan. This is a plan that has been endorsed by both the Sahtú Renewable Resources Board and the GNWT.

This is the process outlined in our established co-management system, and we have complete confidence in both Boards to make smart, effective decisions in the best interest of caribou and the people of the Northwest Territories.

I have also been speaking with my colleague in Nunavut, as the calving grounds and important post-calving areas for both the Bathurst and Bluenose-East caribou are in Nunavut. I am making arrangements to meet with Premier Joe Savikataaq this spring, who is also the Minister of Environment. My hope is for us to sit down with Indigenous leaders from both sides of the border to talk about what steps we can take to help our shared caribou herds.

Mr. Speaker, I know this is a passionate issue for many. We need to avoid the temptation to point fingers and instead focus on working together to make decisions that support the caribou.

We know from both science and traditional knowledge that caribou populations have undergone sharp declines and rapid increases in the past. We all have a role to play during this current low and the GNWT will continue to work with all of our co-management partners, through established wildlife co-management processes, to help ensure caribou can continue to sustain present and future generations of Northerners.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.