

Harvest with Respect

Mr. Speaker, as the weather warms, we are seeing more hunters heading out on the land, including many who are traveling up the winter road to harvest caribou. Most are harvesting safely, respectfully, and following traditional practices.

Unfortunately, a few hunters' illegal and disrespectful harvesting puts unnecessary pressure on barren-ground caribou herds. These herds are already facing challenges related to the changing climate which can impact their habitat and food sources.

Today, I would like to talk about this year's caribou hunting season along the Tibbitt to Contwoyto Winter Road, and how we are working with co-management partners to encourage a safe and respectful harvest. This is particularly important given the significant declines in many barren-ground caribou herds including a 99% decline in the size of the Bathurst herd since 1986. The Bathurst herd is now comprised of just 6,240 caribou.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize the importance of caribou for food security, and we know that current harvest restrictions have been hard on Indigenous people.

ENR is working closely with Indigenous governments and Indigenous organizations to support the conservation and recovery of the Bathurst herd, while also supporting harvest from healthy caribou herds and other wildlife species.

As Minister, I have been working with leaders from the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, the Tłı̨chǫ Government, Łutsel K'e Dene First Nation, North Slave Métis Alliance, Denínu Kúé First Nation, Salt River First Nation, and the Northwest Territories Métis Nation to support the recovery of the Bathurst herd. An important part of this effort is the mobile zone, which was created in 2015. The mobile zone is based on the current location of Bathurst caribou by using satellite collars. It provides a buffer around the herd, which is kept as small as possible, and offers protection to the herd, by prohibiting harvesting within this zone. This zone is maintained using a collaborative approach by the GNWT, the Tłı̨chǫ Government

and the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board. It is also supported by various co-management partners.

Weekly maps are posted at ENR and community offices, online on the ENR website, and along the winter road to let people know where the mobile zone is. Officers along the winter road provide information to hunters and can help them load the map on their GPS.

ENR continues to have a strong enforcement presence along the winter road, including regular patrols by vehicle, snow machine, and helicopter. So far this year, we have three ongoing investigations of illegal harvest involving a total of 22 caribou. We are also working with community-based monitors and guardians established by some Indigenous co-management partners. They work with harvesters to provide up-to-date information about the mobile zone and about where caribou harvesting can be done legally.

But Mr. Speaker, enforcement is just one part of the equation. We want to encourage traditional practices that will help sustain wildlife populations and support recovery of the Bathurst herd. ENR has many programs designed to encourage communities and individuals to get out on the land and to harvest, including the Community Harvesters Assistance Program and the Take a Family on the Land Program.

For many years ENR has provided funding to communities on the range of the Bathurst herd. This funding is intended to support harvesting from other healthy herds, and other species. I am pleased to hear about several successful community hunts which have provided meat to communities, including moose and caribou from the Beverly herd. Last year we learned of accessible Beverly caribou in an area outside the mobile zone where they had not historically been found. We worked with partners to provide harvesters with the appropriate authorizations to legally harvest in that area. Last December, we worked with Indigenous governments and Indigenous organizations to hold a gathering with respected harvesters to listen to their advice on how to encourage safe and respectful harvesting practices. In January, I met with Indigenous leaders to consider eight recommendations that came out of that gathering. We used what we heard from these harvesters to develop messaging, and we have improved our overall communications to reach a broader audience.

Mr. Speaker, respectful harvesting is a cornerstone of traditional values. The GNWT, with the support of co-management partners and Indigenous leaders, is working to encourage friends, family, and community members to harvest respectfully and legally.

If you know someone who might have wasted their harvest or hunted illegally, remind them that our collective goal is to ensure that there are caribou for our children and grandchildren. Encourage them to follow the Indigenous knowledge shared by leaders, elders, and respected harvesters. Remind them to take only what they need from the areas where harvesting is allowed, to take bulls and leave cows, and to share their caribou meat with Elders and people in need.

Respectful harvesting is an important part of ensuring that these caribou herds remain healthy for generations to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.