

**THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE COCHRANE**  
**PREMIER**

**No.: 377-19(2)**  
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**Sessional Statement – September 2023**

Mr. Speaker, I would like to welcome my colleagues back to the house for the final session of the 19<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly. Many of us have been through at least one evacuation since we last met in person, and I am grateful you are all safe.

For many NWT residents, you have recently returned home from a very long evacuation. Some residents have lost homes and businesses. For students, this is yet another disruption to their school year.

While it is tradition for the Premier to deliver a final Sessional Statement to recap and celebrate the accomplishments of their government, today I want to start by celebrating NWT residents and communities for their unending resilience in the face of so much adversity. To Hay River and the K'atlodeeche First Nation in particular, I see the hardship created by repeated evacuations due to both floods and fires. Words cannot express my admiration for you. This is the kind of resilience that makes me proud to live in the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Speaker, I want to acknowledge the tragic passing of fire fighter Adam Yeadon from Fort Liard. Adam lost his life this summer while protecting his community from wildfire. Adam was passionate about his work as a firefighter, and we will honour his sacrifice with a scholarship in his name.

We often forget that first responders put themselves at risk every day in the critical work they do, and it is important to express our gratitude for their dedication to this work. I am very thankful to all first responders and firefighters who, like Adam, take pride in their work and commit to it fully despite the risk.

Against the odds, we have demonstrated resilience by working together through a series of adversities. This is a testament to the passion of all Members with whom I have had the pleasure to serve over the last four years. I want to thank everyone in this Chamber for the countless hours they have spent supporting and advocating for their constituents.

We have faced many challenges during the life of this Legislative Assembly. On February 7, 2020, I tabled the new Mandate of the Government of the Northwest Territories. Just over a month later, the first wave of COVID-19 hit the territory. It is hard to believe such a globally significant event now seems like a distant memory, even after it has profoundly shaped nearly every aspect of this Legislative Assembly.

We faced unprecedented flooding two years in a row, which destroyed homes, cabins, businesses, and other infrastructure in multiple communities. These floods were followed a year later by a catastrophic 2023 wildfire season, in which over four million hectares of the territory have burned, and the season is not over yet.

Frontline workers and emergency management personnel across the territory have been tested time and again over the life of this Legislative Assembly. They often work incredibly long hours for the benefit of residents, and I would like to thank them for their dedication to public service.

First responders have been with us every step of the way, from the pandemic to natural disasters. As this year's wildfire season stretches into a sixth month, I want to thank them for the amazing work they do each and every day.

I would also like to thank our neighbouring provinces and territories who welcomed two thirds of the territory's population during the recent wildfire evacuations. Thank you to all the Indigenous, federal, provincial, territorial and community governments that provided support during this very challenging time. I also want to acknowledge the many volunteers who provided meals, supported families and did everything from giving rides to offering a

place to stay. Finally, I want to extend my gratitude to the Alberta Emergency Management Agency for offering their assistance and expertise, and for helping to coordinate with other agencies across the province.

Mr. Speaker, during the life of this government, my Cabinet colleagues and I have been committed to serving the people of the Northwest Territories. While our decisions have not always been popular, they have always been made with integrity and with the goal of building a better future for us all.

This government's mandate reflected the 22 priorities set by all Members of the Legislative Assembly. I am pleased to advise Members that despite numerous challenges, this government has fulfilled 77% of our mandate commitments, another 13% are in progress, 9% have been delayed, and less than 1% have been discontinued. Later today, I will table the final progress report on this government's mandate which contains more detail about each completed commitment.

Since it was tabled in February 2020, the GNWT has initiated and carried out many significant actions in support of the mandate in key areas, including strengthening relationships with Indigenous governments and advancing reconciliation, providing improved social, economic, and governance supports for NWT communities and residents, and implementing efforts to grow, diversify, and sustain our economy and strengthen climate change action.

As a government, we have worked closely with our colleagues, partners, and residents to make notable progress on the promises we made in 2020. We have advanced our initiatives despite significant adversity. I am particularly proud of how well we adapted and continued to prioritize the health and wellbeing of the residents and communities of the NWT.

Mr. Speaker, while the mandate set out the broad strokes of what we wanted to achieve during the 19<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly, it is not the only way to measure this government's success. Supported by an incredible public service, we have so much to be proud of.

During my time as Premier, I have spoken at length about the importance of relationship-building and partnerships. In their mandate letters, I set the expectation that every Minister must foster constructive and respectful government-to-government relationships with Indigenous partners and seek ways to advance reconciliation, recognize and affirm Aboriginal rights, and support expanded program and service delivery by Indigenous governments.

I am especially proud of the work we have done with Indigenous governments. We have furthered land and self-government negotiations. We have removed the requirements for Indigenous governments to meet core principles and objectives, and we have published our negotiating mandates for clarity and transparency. We also established the Northwest Territories Council of Leaders, an example of meaningful collaboration between leaders from across the Northwest Territories, and this is a table at which the GNWT is just one voice among many. The creation of this table has allowed us to strengthen programs and services, including working together to tackle our housing crisis, to respond to the calls for justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and to develop the proposed United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples legislation, which I hope to see passed this Session.

This government has been focused on improving the health and wellbeing of all residents. We have made changes to income assistance to better serve residents, we have increased the number of public housing units, and implemented a housing strategic renewal framework. There are more supports than ever to help seniors age in place. Significant progress has been made toward building a wellness and recovery centre in Yellowknife, and mental health services are undergoing an important transformation to ensure residents can access them in their time of need. Earlier this year, the GNWT also released the territory's alcohol strategy which lays out concrete steps to address alcohol-related harms through policy, education, public safety, communications, and treatment initiatives.

As part of a long-term commitment to primary health care reform, we have seen the creation of integrated care teams in Fort Smith, Fort Good Hope and Yellowknife to ensure residents have access to care with the right provider and can build relationships to enhance continuity of care. The child and family services quality improvement plan is helping the government make real progress on delivering culturally safe programs and services to all NWT residents, including those most vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, I am very proud that the Homelessness Strategy has been completed during my time as Premier. This work was done collaboratively with partners in the non-profit sector and looks for realistic solutions to challenges. Not only does this strategy set a goal to increase the number of housing units, including transitional housing, it also highlights the need to integrate the delivery of various services to ensure we focus on clients and their needs, as well as their hopes and aspirations. I look forward to seeing the progress on implementing this strategy in the next government.

We have also made great strides in how we address public safety. The pandemic was a wake-up call for governments around the world, and we have learned from our response and from the response of others and used these lessons to inform how we respond to other emergencies like wildfire and flooding. The GNWT's emergency management organization, or EMO, has been put to the test on multiple occasions over the last four years, most recently during this year's wildfire season. Lessons learned have resulted in continuous improvement such as the addition of regional EMO staff and updates to the GNWT's Disaster Assistance Policy.

Mr. Speaker, The NWT is experiencing the effects of climate change up to four times faster than the rest of the world, and this has been top of mind in decision-making for this government. In addition to completing several climate change-related mandate commitments, I want to highlight the GNWT's Capital Asset Retrofit Fund, which is now self-sufficient and will result in reduced greenhouse gas emissions, including a reduction of over 17 thousand tonnes by the end of this fiscal year. I am very happy to share that \$3.75 million

dollars of annual utility savings will go toward funding 100 percent of next year's Capital Asset Retrofit Fund.

In the last four years our government has overseen the completion of several major capital projects, including the Tłıchǫ Highway, École ı́łł'ò in Yellowknife, the Inuvik High Powered Wind Turbine project, the Hay River Fish Plant, and various highway improvement projects. Further, we have successfully operated and maintained hundreds of GNWT assets from buildings to highways to ensure important services would continue to be available, despite some exceptionally difficult circumstances.

With the creation of the Department of Environment and Climate Change, we have also seen an improvement to how this government coordinates and makes decisions on land and natural resources management. The updated Healthy Land, Healthy People work plan scopes out the future for protected and conserved areas, and the Participant Funding Program provides long-term, secure funding to establish and maintain protected and conserved areas. We have also seen the creation of protected and conserved areas including the Edehzhie National Wildlife Area, the Ts'udé Nilı́né Tuyeta Indigenous and territorial protected area, and the Sahtú K'aowe Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area. Collaboration on *Public Land Act* regulations through the Intergovernmental Council on Land and Resource Management Legislative Development Protocol is also a transformative approach for how we as a government work on legislation.

On the education and training front, I am very proud of the work of our education system and of the hard-working educators across the territory who adapted to the challenging circumstances of the pandemic and pivoted to an online learning model to allow students to continue their studies at home. In fact, this year NWT schools have once again adapted to change as they begin to pilot curriculum from British Columbia which is open to NWT Indigenous ways and will appropriately challenge students while supporting key learning for life.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to highlight the incredible work that has been done to advance Indigenous language programming in NWT schools. In particular, the Mentor-Apprentice Program helps apprentices increase their ability to understand and speak their language by living life in the language.

This government has worked hard to support businesses, including continuing to promote the importance of the resource sector and the significant opportunities it holds, as well as undertaking the long-awaited procurement review. Private industry is a cornerstone of our economy, and we have been working hard to cut red tape and support entrepreneurs. I recognize that more is needed to enable government support for businesses during emergencies, and it is my hope this will be top of mind for the next government.

Mr. Speaker, we have made significant changes to the way the GNWT does business. I want to take this opportunity to again thank all Members of the Legislative Assembly, residents, businesses, community leaders, stakeholders, and all Budget Dialogue participants for their input in developing the GNWT budgets during the 19<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly.

The 2023-2024 budget has been challenged by the dramatically increased costs of this year's wildfire season. As a result, our operating surplus is expected to drop from a projected \$178 million to about \$5 million. This drop in operating surplus is expected in the current fiscal year only and is not expected to persist in future years. However, the GNWT will likely run a deficit in 2023-2024 when our capital expenditures are considered.

The fiscal outlook is stable despite these large expenditure shocks, partly because Canada will provide disaster relief funding. Under the Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangement, in the coming years, the GNWT may recover up to 90% of evacuation and rebuilding costs incurred during the 2023 wildfire season. Normally this can take several years but we are negotiating with Canada to advance some of this money sooner. The federal government has been receptive to this idea and is considering it.

The stable outlook is also due to right-sizing the capital budget this fiscal year to reflect the capacity to complete infrastructure projects, which improved the cash balance and debt outlook. Additionally, strengthening the Fiscal Responsibility Policy so that GNWT total borrowing is more closely linked to the federally imposed borrowing limit helps maintain the stable outlook.

So, while this will be a challenging year, our overall fiscal situation will remain relatively stable over the next few years, and we do not anticipate reaching the federal debt limit in the near term.

Mr. Speaker, during my time as Premier, I have tirelessly advocated for the Northwest Territories to receive appropriate funding from the Government of Canada. I have been especially vocal in the last year, particularly in the media and at the various meetings of Canada's Premiers. Most recently, I have been clear that this has been a record-setting wildfire season for the territory, including an extraordinary financial cost and we cannot face this burden alone.

Canada's failure to make transformational investments will leave the NWT facing the devastation and staggering cost of climate change without sufficient economic opportunities to cover the increased expenses. Modern transportation, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure are paramount for the prosperity of Northerners and to keep pace with our southern counterparts. Such investments would support life changing projects and enable NWT residents to pursue financial stability.

The federal government's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, launched in 2019, acknowledged the serious gaps between North and South when it comes to infrastructure, as well as government programs and supports available to residents. To date, there has been no implementation plan, nor any dedicated funding announced. I believe strongly that these gaps have widened in recent years due to the effects of the pandemic, Canada's per capita



funding model, and the insistence that the NWT fit into national program models without recognizing our unique circumstances.

Northerners are not second-class citizens in Canada and should not be treated as such. In my final sessional statement as Premier, I want to make one thing abundantly clear: the North will not be silenced in its calls for treatment equal to that received by Canadian provinces. The time for investment in the North and true partnership is now. I want to thank our allies in Ottawa and beyond, for helping to amplify this message to the federal government. We must continue to deliver this message loud and clear on behalf of all NWT residents.

In the final Session of the 19<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly, we have critically important work ahead to set up the next Legislative Assembly for success. We will debate first-of-their-kind legislation, including the *Forest Act* and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Implementation Act*. The *Forest Act* was developed side by side with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations and renewable resource boards using, for the first time, the Intergovernmental Council on Land and Resource Management's Legislative Development Protocol. The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Implementation Act* was developed through the NWT Council of Leaders, a shining example of partnership with Indigenous governments and Indigenous organizations. I am so pleased to be closing out this Legislative Assembly with incredibly strong relationships across the territory.

Mr. Speaker, no Premier makes this journey alone. I want to thank the public for holding me and this government to account. I want to thank Ministers for their hard work over these past four years and for the leadership they have shown. To all levels of government, but especially to Indigenous governments: thank for you working with us and developing what I think are among the strongest relationships between our government and Indigenous leadership in the territory's history. Thank you to my fellow Members for their passion and for their many ideas to improve our territory. To the staff who have supported Cabinet, my heartfelt thanks for your dedication and expertise.

Mr. Speaker, it is bittersweet to deliver my final sessional statement. The last four years have challenged me in ways I cannot fully express, but I can say with certainty that I have grown as a person and as a leader. I have also been privileged to see the personal and professional growth of my colleagues in this House.

As this government comes to an end, and another is about to begin, I am optimistic when I think about what's in store for the NWT.

I want to thank my colleagues for trusting me four years ago. Leading our territory is one of the great privileges of my life and I will be forever grateful for the opportunity.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.