

**THE HONOURABLE SHANE THOMPSON
MINISTER OF LANDS
MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES
MINISTER RESPONSIBLE FOR THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
POWER CORPORATION**

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COVID-19

I would like to begin today, Mr. Speaker, by commending the courage and resolve of our front line staff responding to this unprecedented public health emergency.

From medical personnel, to the folks stocking shelves and keeping the grocery stores open, to the water and fuel delivery staff and the officers in our communities and at the borders – I am grateful to you all for this selfless work. It is because you are at work that others, in fact, much of the Government of the Northwest Territories workforce, have been able to work remotely through this crisis.

Mr. Speaker, it has indeed been a challenge with so many people working from home – many with added responsibilities – to ensure each department can continue to fulfill its critical functions. From processing applications for land leases, to issuing permits for wildlife and forestry, and keeping the lights on across the Northwest Territories, has required extra time and attention.

For the Northwest Territories Power Corporation, this includes new protocols for entering communities and performing emergency work or required maintenance. Importantly, this also means working with the Emergency Measures Office to acquire Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to keep those essential workers safe.

COVID-19 has changed the way we work, but the work to protect our land, water and air must continue. Staff at the departments of Lands and Environment and Natural Resources has worked diligently to develop new protocols to ensure the important work of protecting our environment and managing land use can continue in a way that is safe for our

employees and residents. This includes new ways of carrying out inspections; research and environmental monitoring while maintaining physical distance and respecting the public health orders that are in place.

Environmental assessments are a critical part of our regulatory system in the Northwest Territories, and involve a high level of coordination between departments, agencies and Indigenous governments. Despite the challenges caused by the pandemic, I am proud to say we are on track to meet the legislated timeline of June 06, 2020, to complete our response to the Review Board on the Diavik Environmental Assessment.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, many northerners are going out on the land in response to COVID-19. As a result, Environment and Natural Resources and Lands officers have increased wildlife monitoring, enforcement activities and inspections.

And of course, the way we fight fires this summer will be unlike any other season before. Environment and Natural Resources has been preparing for months, reviewing best practices in other jurisdictions and adapting our operations to reduce the risks to our staff and our communities.

On top of their regular duties, many of our Environment and Natural Resources and Lands officers have also stepped up to support the larger Government of the Northwest Territories-wide effort to combat the spread of COVID-19. These efforts are critical to keeping our families and communities safe and healthy.

Between Environment and Natural Resources and Lands, well over 70 staff have taken on extra duties or lent their expertise to other departments over the last couple of months, notably the Emergency Management Organization, the COVID Compliance and Enforcement Taskforce and at border crossing check stations.

The level of collaboration and cooperation throughout the Government of the Northwest Territories has been incredible. At Lands alone, a full 25 per cent of the department's employees are on redeployment or reassignment as part of the COVID-19 efforts.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to give a special shout out to Environment and Natural Resources' Taiga Environmental Laboratory. The lab has been hard at work in recent weeks producing hand sanitizer for our frontline workers, including the officers I just mentioned.

Getting the supplies and the okay from Health Canada to produce took a lot of time and effort but it is truly paying off. At last count, the lab has produced more than 4,000 litres of hand sanitizer!

Mr. Speaker, the physical distancing and isolation measures put in place to combat the spread of COVID-19 have created new and very real economic stress on Northwest Territories residents, families, businesses, Indigenous governments and communities.

That's why the Department of Lands is helping to ease some of the burden by waiving rent for leaseholders on public land, for the fiscal year 2020-2021. Looking forward, we hope to be able to open our regional and local offices to the public very soon under appropriate health order protocols.

And that's not all. To help customers impacted by the crisis, Northwest Territories Power Corporation removed all load limiters, suspended disconnections and collection activity. At the same time, Northwest Territories Power Corporation is coordinating their response with its counterparts across the country and with the territorial Emergency Management Organization. Through it all, Northwest Territories Power Corporation is keeping its workers safe while maintaining optimum service levels for Northwest Territories residents.

I am grateful to the many individuals across my departments who have taken on extra duties to ensure we continue to protect our land, air and water and ensure the wise use of our natural resources. I appreciate your commitment to the important work we do.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.