

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 268-18(2): HABITAT PROTECTION FOR BATHURST CARIBOU HERD

June 23, 2016

MR. O'REILLY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While we're on the subject of creating heat, I have some questions for the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources. In October of 2010 the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board made recommendations to GNWT and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada to develop best practises for avoiding impacts to caribou. The Board also asked for monitoring of landscape changes. Can the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources tell us whether GNWT has responded to those recommendations from six years ago and the status of this work? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Environment and Natural Resources.

HON. WALLY SCHUMANN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. ENR has been engaged with Nunavut on issues of protection of caribou during calving and post-calving. GNWT and ENR is a registered participant in the Nunavut Planning Commission process for developing a Nunavut Land Use Plan. During the technical meetings up this point, the GNWT has put forward the position that in this industrial activity of any type including mineral exploration, production, construction of roads, pipelines, and other infrastructure should not be permitted on the calving areas. ENR staff participated in NPC technical meeting specifically on the subject of protection of caribou habitat in Nunavut including calving and post-calving ranges. The progress of the meetings was to build consensus on approaches for habitat and disturbance management through the combination of tools such as conservation areas as well as seasonal and locational restrictions on development activities. With respect to monitoring and landscape changes ENR has a number of initiatives underway to track and report on the status of Barren-ground caribou ranges in the NWT.

Since 2013, the NWT Cumulative Impact Monitoring Program and partners have developed a series of validated anthropogenic disturbance footprints for the different administrative regions for the NWT. These data sets will be updated twice a year to ensure the data remain current. The NWT state of the environment report reports on human activity and landscape disturbances on an annual basis by ecozone. The GNWT monitors all land use permits submitted on the ranges of the Barren-land caribou including within the Nunavut and provides expert comments and recommendations on all permits that may be negatively impacted caribou habitat especially with respect to sensitive habitat such as calving and post-calving grounds. ENR and Forest Management Division delineates the areas of forest impact by fire on an annual basis across the Northwest Territories.

This information is publicly available on ENR's data warehouse, ENR has contracted out to summarize the environmental trends from 1979 to 2014 for NWT Barren-ground caribou herds with the interpretation of herd specific trends and their implications on each herd. ENR expects those results this year and will make them available to interested parties as soon as possible as a report is available.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. I believe that is a thorough, detailed answer.

---Laughter

MR. SPEAKER: If we can make it short and concise and clear for the question period and also for answering as well. Masi.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to talk a little bit here about caribou protection measures. The Minister mentioned that GNWT rightly opposed the mineral development in the calving grounds of the Bathurst caribou herd on the Nunavut side. Yet, there is still no caribou protection measures in place for the Bathurst caribou or any herd on the NWT side of the border. I would like to know from the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, what specific actions has GNWT taken to reduce the impacts of mining activities on the Bathurst caribou herd on our side of the border?

HON. WALLY SCHUMANN: I don't know if I can make this too short or not. GNWT is working through several avenues to address the impact of mineral exploration and development on the Bathurst herd. Actions related to individual projects are typically addressed through EA assessments, regulatory permitting process through the development, and implementation and review of wildlife management and monitoring plans for proposed and existing developments. Specifically ENR remains engaged in a review process of proposed developments within the Bathurst range, for example Gahcho Kue and J-Pipe extension associated with Ekati, to ensure possible effects on the Bathurst herd are duly considered and mitigated where possible for projects in NWT ENR's developing guidelines industry to support the development of wildlife management and monitoring plans which can now be required for operations that may cause significant disturbance to wildlife and wildlife habitat.

MR. O'REILLY: Appreciate the response from the Minister. Still didn't hear the words though, "caribou protection measures." But I will try a different tactic here. Can the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources tell us what concrete actions have been taken in terms of habitat protection on the NWT side of the border in the interest of the Bathurst caribou herd?

HON. WALLY SCHUMANN: In terms of the impact on the herd on the NWT side of the border, we acknowledge that the hardships have been taken on to the communities of the -- we are working with the communities on a plan with the Bathurst herd. The Member knows that. This is a very serious matter.

Developing approaches to protect the habitat is the long-term endeavour. Including the engagement of many parties, ENR has been involved in a few initiatives of advance habitat protection to protect the herd from disturbances during sensitive time periods. One of the involvements of the Nunavut Land Use planning process method mentioned earlier, the other is a range planning process that is taking place now. In our supportive participants from the Departments of ITI and Lands and Industries working towards the development of a range plan for the Bathurst caribou herd. This plan is being undertaken by a working group of 21 partners, including the Tlicho government, the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board, other Aboriginal organizations, industry, and ENGOs. The range plan would be a guidance document for the use by wildlife management authorities, including government, making recommendations on habitat management. Issues such as conservation areas, acceptable levels of disturbance of the range, seasonal and mobile range caribou conservation measures.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Appreciate the answer from the Minister again. But we have already taken steps on the harvest side. There is not going to be any harvesting on the Bathurst caribou herd by Aboriginal peoples, residents, outfitters, and so on. I am asking what are we going to do on the habitat side? Earlier, I mentioned how the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board says that we need to take action now as managers. I have been involved in this range planning exercise myself in a previous life. But when are we going to see some results? And is this government prepared to take some interim actions now as a manager, particularly on the habitat side for caribou protection measures? What are we going to do now? I don't think we can wait for this range plan. Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

HON. WALLY SCHUMANN: As the Member is aware, we are working with all the people that are associated with this herd, from industry to NGOs to Aboriginal governments to boards. We are having consultation with these people ready to come up with a plan for this herd. As soon as we can come up with a schedule, how we are going to move forward with this -- the group is working on this, and we will share that with the Members and committee when possible. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.