

## MEMBER STATEMENT—KEVIN O'REILLY MLA FRAME LAKE

### IMPROVING CONSUMER PROTECTION

February 23, 2017

**MR. O'REILLY:** Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to speak today about protecting NWT consumers from false advertising and ensuring the integrity of our tourism products and branding for our visitors.

Most people remember the high-profile case of pickerel offered at a local restaurant which was actually a fish from Kazakhstan called Zander. The real news turned out to be the lack of protection for our consumers through no penalties under our NWT *Consumer Protection Act*. There does not appear to be any power to lay charges or seek fines. Municipal and Community Affairs, which administers the legislation, has set up a complaint system. The department acts as a mediator between complainants and businesses. At the time of the fish story, the deputy minister is quoted as saying that, after a complaint was filed, "We hope that they can work it out themselves." He said public awareness plays a role by putting pressure on businesses not to mislead consumers.

Mr. Speaker, I don't think that's good enough. We should actually expect a lot more from our government. In Alaska, a media report indicated a restaurant was fined \$50,000 for selling New Zealand elk as Alaska reindeer. In Quebec, misleading customers on the composition of food will get you a \$500 to \$9,000 fine.

There are two issues here. One is to provide a mechanism ensuring consumers who have been intentionally misled can get redress with legislative requirements that forces retailers to give a refund and make things right. The other issue is one of deterrence, to actively discourage misrepresentation. A tourist on a five-day trip from overseas is not likely to file an English-language complaint, even with the potential for a refund. We need a stronger consumer protection system with powers to investigate complaints and lay charges on behalf of the public and fines robust enough that retailers make sure products are as they are described. As more and more livelihoods are based upon the world-class quality of our tourism destination, we want to actively discourage bad players from hurting our reputation. This does not happen often, but we must be vigilant.

I don't want to give the impression we are uniquely behind. Our Yukon neighbour is not much further ahead in this regard, but with our growing tourism sector we need to begin thinking about protecting our resident consumers, our Northern products, and reputation. I'll be asking questions later today of the Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker