

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 44-18(3): CARIBOU CALVING GROUNDS

October 20, 2017

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My question is for the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources. Later today, we will be debating a motion about development in the calving grounds of one of our migratory caribou herds. The Bathurst caribou herd has plummeted from a high of 472,000 animals to 16,000. Indigenous governments have voluntarily halted harvesting, yet nothing has been done in terms of habitat protection. Can the Minister give us an update on the status of the Bathurst herd and whether there are any signs of recovery? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the Bathurst caribou herd did decline to about 19,800 caribou in 2015. It was a 96 per cent decline from peak numbers estimated, as the Member pointed out, 472,000. The herd was fairly stable 2009-12, but declined further 2012-2015. A calving photo survey will provide an updated population estimate, and it is planned for June of 2018, and then management will be revisited once a new herd estimate is known.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks to the Minister for that. I take it from his response that there is no signs of recovery. GNWT has been leading a range-planning exercise for the Bathurst caribou herd, and I commended the Minister in the House for this work back in March of this year. Can the Minister give us a status report on this range-planning exercise and when we can expect to see a concrete plan and some actions to protect the Bathurst herd and its habitat?

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I need to commend some of the Aboriginal groups that are taking it upon themselves to preserve the caribou. I think just in the news lately, recently, there was a historic wildlife management agreement signed by seven Indigenous groups in Quebec that wanted to protect the caribou in Ungava Peninsula, and I think that takes a great deal of leadership. So they decided that they would do that on their own. The Porcupine Caribou Management Board also has taken an active role in the protection of the caribou in their area. The Member is right; we will be debating that motion later on today.

The working group met in late September to review a draft of the Bathurst caribou range plan, and the draft plan is based on the best available traditional knowledge and science and makes recommendations for managing disturbance to caribou. The draft plan will be presented to the Minister and Committee-of-Cabinet on economy and environment in November and will go out for public engagement.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks to the Minister for that update. It was very helpful. Protection of NWT caribou herds is a complex matter as there are a number of communities that have traditionally harvested herds, most migrate between the NWT and Nunavut, there are different management regimes on each side of the boundary, and very little habitat

has any permanent protection. That raises the issue of whether our government has any policy or position on resource development within calving grounds. Can the Minister say whether our government has a position or policy on resource development within caribou calving grounds?

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Mr. Speaker, GNWT has concerns about potential adverse impacts of projects on the population and habitat of transboundary wildlife species while recognizing the potential benefit of any proposed projects. Calving grounds are widely considered, both from a scientist and traditional knowledge perspective, as the most sensitive habitat for migratory barren-ground caribou herds, and so we do take very seriously and look at very closely any projects that are happening within the calving grounds. As the Member noted, we need to do what we can do to protect those calving grounds. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President, and thanks to the Minister for that. It sort of sounds like we handled this matter on a case-by-case basis. The next case, though, has come up before us. Grays Bay Road and Port Project will cut through the remaining cabin grounds for the Bathurst caribou herd. GNWT did not object in principle to the project, and support a less rigorous review.

A review by a panel under federal legislation would have given us an opportunity to appoint individuals to that panel, would have guaranteed participant funding while still reporting to the same Minister, as a new to impact review board-led review. Can the Minister provide an explanation as to why our government supports a less rigorous review process for the Grays Bay project, where our rights and interests are less likely to be heard? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: The GNWT recommended further review and left the decision to the Nunavut Impact Review Board. We felt that the decision for a northern project would be best handled by the northern. While there is potential for a federal panel that included GNWT reps, under the land claims agreement, the panel members are appointed by the Nunavut minister and federal minister and there would be no guarantee of NWT representation. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.