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Bathurst Caribou Herd
Committee of the Whole—2019-2020 Operating Budget Review
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MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. The first day of this sitting, I asked the Minister about the status of the Bathurst caribou range plan, and I still do not have an answer, so I will try again. Can the Minister tell me what's happening with this range plan? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Dr. Dragon.

DR. DRAGON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. With the Bathurst caribou range plan, right now one of the things that we are working on is ensuring that we have very much detailed any of the industrial activity that could be potentially going on in the North and making sure that we have included that within our model. We have been doing the Bathurst caribou range plan for the last four years, where we have been looking at, with our Indigenous governments and our partners, to be able to come up with a robust plan. I think we are just about there. We have brought in the contractor who was originally doing the modelling work for us, who would look at any of the cumulative effects of any development in that area. Because, the range plan, it is right in an area of potential development, we just want to make sure that we have had all of that type of potential activity put into the range plan before we release it. It's very much imminent in terms of its release. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Yes. I was involved in starting the work on that before I even arrived here, so I am worried that this is taking way too long while the herd continues to decline. The Minister, in response to questions from my colleague earlier today, talked about the need to develop a plan. That is the plan for the Bathurst caribou herd. Everybody was involved in making it. How much longer is it going to take to get this thing approved, and does it have to go through Cabinet? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My understanding in talking to the deputy is that within a month or so we will be able to bring it to Cabinet and get Cabinet's input. Then I believe it will go out to the public afterwards; go out to committee, then the public. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you, Minister. Good catch. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I am not sure what the deputy minister means by having to detail industrial activities and getting the contractor to do more modelling work. That is all fine and dandy, but, meanwhile, the caribou herd continues to decline. Most importantly, there is not one cent of new money in the budget for the caribou crisis. Why is there no new money in the budget for the caribou crisis? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We recognize the severity of the declining caribou herd. We heard it throughout our tour of the Tlicheo, and we heard it from the Yellowknives, as well. I have instructed the department, as I was responding. I have directed the department to come up with a plan to address a lot of the issues that we have heard about. I think in response to an oral question before, I said that we are looking at trying to have this work done as quickly as possible and have it come forward in the form of a supplemental if need be. On top of the ongoing work that we do as part of our regular budgeting process on the caribou, I have directed the department to look for additional funding, have put in a request for additional funding, to expand on the work of the caribou, so we would like to see that come forward here in the form of a supplemental sometime during the life of this Assembly. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Yes, I really look forward to seeing what this supplemental looks like, but the plan doesn't actually require new money to do some of the things that are already set out in there. Offsetting, mobile caribou conservation measures, I don't think that that actually requires a lot of money to do, so when is the department going to start doing some work on protection of habitat instead of just concentrating on wolves and harvesters? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We are doing a lot of work in this particular area. Wolves and harvesters are just part of the work that we are doing. Those seem to be the ones that are highlighted all the time, so those are the ones that would get the most attention, but there is a lot of work that goes on as part of our regular work within the management of caribou. I am going to, through you, Mr. Chair, go to Dr. Dragon to give us an explanation of some of the work that we have ongoing. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Dr. Dragon.

DR. DRAGON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just thought that I would go through the next steps of what we look to do with the range plan so that the Members can understand the process of what needs to be done. We are going to have a "what we heard" document for all of the consultation that we have been doing with our Indigenous government partners and a decision paper by the end of this fiscal year. It is imminent, as I mentioned. One of the things that we have to do with that range plan, because we are in the Wek'eezhii area is that we have to go to the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board for review, as per section 12.5 of the Tlicheo agreement, and to also provide the proposed range plan to standing committee.

In terms of recommendations, we are looking at a number of recommendations within that plan, intensifying project mitigation as cumulative disturbance increases, and that is one of the areas where I thought that we needed to have a look at any new development that is being put into play. We are looking at transmission lines. We are looking at any new Terra X development. Anything that is current, we put in that plan so

that we can make a really good decision on the plan. Again, this includes thresholds for limiting development under existing disturbances and making sure that they are restored.

We are also looking at the conservation of the Bathurst caribou calving and post-calving grounds and important water crossings and land crossings. As the Member mentioned, also, more mobile caribou conservation measures, so looking at the core areas within the Bathurst caribou zone, managing roads and traffic, and adding patches of unburnt forest in the winter range to our values at risk. That is another initiative that we are doing, along with the wolves, is we are looking at how we are currently addressing forest fire in the Bathurst range. Right now, unfortunately, with the herd that they are in terms of the size, at 8,200 animals, they are right now not really in any of the forested areas. They are more above the treeline. Unfortunately, right now, with their numbers, we don't see a lot of them within the treeline.

We are going to return to Cabinet after, with the results of the WRB conversation, the SCEDE review, and then we will request the final approval of the range plan. Then we will move into the implementation phase of that. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the description of that, but I guess I am worried that, by the time we get through all of those steps, there may not be any caribou left. \$150,000 was cut from boreal caribou monitoring in last year's budget. The Minister said that there was going to be additional funding on the way to make up for that. Our requirements for boreal caribou continue to increase. We have to have a recovery strategy. There is going to be more monitoring required as a result of the Tlicho all-season road. Where is the money for boreal caribou work? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We want to do a thorough job on the work that we do, and we don't have much choice. We can't make a unilateral decision. We have committed to working with our Aboriginal partners on trying to move this forward. Again, credit to our Aboriginal partners; they recognize that this is a serious issue, and they want to move forward as well. I think it is going to carry a lot more weight, and it is going to go a lot further in partnership with the Aboriginal governments.

As far as the boreal caribou, in responding to questions from the Member for Yellowknife North during oral questions earlier this afternoon, I did mention that we are looking at possibly making some type of an announcement here shortly.

I take the Member's point. I remember distinctly last year saying that the \$150,000 was going to be eliminated, but we are working with Canada to try to secure some funding. My understanding is that within the next few days year, or during the life of this session, we should be able to make an announcement to address the concerns that the Member is raising. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I understand I am only supposed to have one. Sometimes the questions and answers go on for a bit. I want to talk about the wolf incentive program. I appreciate what the Minister said in the House earlier about outside experts. There was a working group established, including experts from his own department, the Tlicho Government, and other Indigenous governments. They ranked and rated 12 different options for dealing with wolves. The top option was aerial shooting on the cabin grounds. The next one was summer harvest assistance. The next one was diversionary feeding. You have to go more than halfway down the list to find winter harvesting.

This study, published by the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board, shows that the wolf incentive program is not the most effective way to take out wolves. For this to actually work and have an impact on the caribou populations, you have to take out between 60 and 80 percent of the wolf population. I don't think this is going to work, the wolf incentive program. That is what I am fearing. That is what the experts said on the radio, as well. Given this study, why is the department pursuing this incentive program, increasing the wolf bounty? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Dr. Dragon.

DR. DRAGON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. In looking at this issue of trying to address the wolf situation, in every community that we went through, as the Minister mentioned, we had very, very strong comments in terms of wolves and what we could do. Being in the Wek'eezhii area, we cannot change a program or come in with a different type of program without submitting a proposal to the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board. We are currently in the process of doing that. We look to have one done shortly that we would have. It would only come into effect in June of this year. If we did nothing, if we didn't look at having an incentive program, we wouldn't have been able to do anything with wolves.

The other thing that we heard when we went into communities was that it costs a lot to go out on the land. We tried, in the department, in a previous version, increasing the amount of money that we had available for wolves. It didn't work. People came back to us and said, "It is not enough money." We went to communities. What we did was we asked them, "How much would it take for you to have the incentive to come in this region?" The last three years, we have averaged in this North Slave region in between 30 and 40 wolves. To date, we already have 20, and the season for doing that type of hunting hasn't really started. It is starting as of the beginning of March.

We have also had a discussion with our partners in Nunavut because, although the options are provided to go and do actual hunting on cabin grounds, that jurisdiction is in Nunavut. We have no say in terms of what Nunavut can do on their lands. They have to go through the same process of the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board to get authority to do any sort of reduction exercise.

In looking at the option, we decided we would increase the prices to see whether or not we would have people who would go into those regions. What we found is we have had people who are now saying, "You know what? I am thinking about it." We have a lot of the areas where we have hunters who have now, unfortunately, gotten older and don't

go in to do that sort of hunting. If we don't have harvesters in that area, we can't reduce that population.

That is how we approached the situation. It is the only thing that we could really do before June 1st. We decided to increase the levels of the harvest prices. We have had some exceptional feedback from harvesters who are telling us, "Thank you. It is about time." Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I thank the deputy minister for that information. In the additional joint management proposal that is being prepared for the Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board, what will it contain in terms of predator control? I just want it highlights, please. I don't need all the details because I still have a couple of other questions if I can get to them. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Briefly, Minister.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We haven't finalized it yet. We are working with our Tlicho partners to come up with a plan going forward. As the Member said, this program here has been beneficial to help them to take some of the wolf population out as well as assisting in helping our contractors. We could do it by air, but who will benefit from that. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Will there be a management proposal or a predator control proposal submitted to the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board to help protect the Bathurst caribou herd? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Yes, there will.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Well, that is some good news. I look forward to getting further details on that. I do want to pass along some of the concerns that I have heard about the wolf bounty or wolf incentive program. People are worried about caribou being used as bait, potentially. There was a media report from earlier this week about meat wastage on the winter road. People are worried about collateral damage to other species as people go out there, particularly over harvesting of wolverines.

My colleague from Yellowknife North also mentioned hunter safety issues. Some of the people who may be going out may not be as experienced as they could or should be, or maybe not as well prepared as they could be. There was at least one incident last year where someone got lost on the winter road. What steps are the department taking to try to deal with these concerns and issues? Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Minister.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. First of all, let's give some credit to

the folks who go out there. These are people who are experienced hunters, and wolves are what they are after. If they try to use caribou as bait, they could get charged for that. We will come down hard on that. I have heard of stories, not here, where caribou was used as bait. Credit to the local hunters' and trappers' associations, they got after those. To me, that is just ignorant, and it shouldn't be done. Let's give them some credit. I don't think they will be doing that.

As far as collateral damage, it is wolves they are after. I don't think they will be just shooting everything that comes their way. They may take the odd wolverine because there is some incentive just on the fur itself. I don't think it's going to be the Wild West up there, and I do trust the judgment of a lot of folks who go up there. We monitor it. We have 24-hour monitoring. We have a couple of check stops that are there. I've heard from a couple of people saying that they were going in there, and they were actually getting their vehicles checked on the way in to make sure they weren't bringing dump wolves in there, because those aren't the ones that we want. We're doing a lot of work on this, and I'm giving credit to the experience of those that are out there. If those that have no experience go out there, I think they're going to find out awfully quickly they're in over their head.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Mr. O'Reilly.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the response from the Minister. I don't necessarily agree with these concerns. I'm just passing them on from what I heard, and I meant no disrespect to any harvesters who might go out there. If folks are not experienced and not well-prepared, things can go badly sometimes. I don't think anybody wants that to happen, but these are concerns that I'm hearing, and I'm passing them onto the Minister.

I don't have any other questions about this, other than to say that I am very, very concerned that there is no money in the budget for the caribou crisis. We should have anticipated this, and there should have been some money in here for that, and I'm very disturbed that it's not. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Simpson): Thank you. Would the Minister care to respond?

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I didn't mean to go after the messenger, but I'm just a little bit passionate about this. As far as money in the budget for the caribou, I did say earlier that I had given direction to the department to come forward with a plan on dealing with the caribou, as well as my response to questions from the Member from Yellowknife North on the funding that we're hoping to be announcing here during the life of this session, and I think it will be well-received. As well, I've directed the department to try and identify more funding for a lot of the work that we need to do with our Aboriginal partners, because we can't make unilateral decisions. Those days are over. We have to work with our Aboriginal partners now, and all those who are affected by this, because it's the only way it's going to work. Thank you, Mr. Chair.