

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE
QUESTION 79-19(2): GOVERNMENT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES-
GOVERNMENT OF NUNAVUT BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU MEETING
February 25, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to once again thank the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources for the opportunity to observe the GNWT-Nunavut caribou meeting on the weekend. Can the Minister tell us whether there will be further meetings that include more harvesters, elders, interpreters, and presentations from communities and Nunavut organizations? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Environment and Natural Resources.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, I'd like to thank the two Members from Frame Lake and Kam Lake for attending the meeting. That was greatly appreciated, them attending and listening to the concerns by the Indigenous governments and the Government of Nunavut and the GNWT. To make a short answer, yes, we are going to be having a follow-up meeting, both myself and the Premier/Minister from Nunavut. We made a commitment to do the meeting and have it in Kugluktuk as we work on it. Again, we are working toward that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that response. There was quite a bit of discussion around the GNWT-Tlicho Government joint management proposal for wolf removal in relation to the Bathurst and Bluenose East caribou herds at the meeting on the weekend. The proposal still cannot be found on the Wek'eezhii Renewal Resources Board website; I'm not sure why. Can the Minister tell us who will make the determination if aerial shooting of wolves is required and on what basis that decision will be made?

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: I can't tell why that information is not on somebody else's board, but we did submit it to them, so we're working with them on that. So that the Member is aware, we are looking at the scientific and the traditional knowledge before we make a decision. We've looked at it. We've heard rumours -- not rumours, but we've heard from traditional hunters that wolves may not be as abundant as they are right now, so that may have an impact on it. We're hoping that the traditional hunting and harvesting will be done, and we will never have to use the aerial; but, if it needs to be done, that will be the department making that final decision.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. I hope it's the Minister who makes the final decision and not the department. There was a lot of frustration at the meeting, particularly from the Dene communities that have shouldered the burden of actions to try to help with recovery of the Bathurst and Bluenose East caribou herds. They haven't been able to harvest those herds for a number of years now. While I generally agree with the need for predator controls, virtually nothing has been done to protect habitat and slow down resource development. What is the Minister doing to protect habitat to ensure a more equitable and comprehensive approach to caribou protection that includes limitations or restrictions on resource development?

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: The Bathurst Caribou Range Plan made nine recommendations to manage the range of the Bathurst caribou herd. Habitat conservation is recommended in areas of importance to caribou, such as key water crossings and land corridors. ENR is supporting Indigenous governments to document these key habitats and features. We will then work collaboratively to identify legislative tools to establish conservation areas. The Bathurst Caribou Range Plan recommends managing the total level of development on the range of the herd, including industrial development in communities and roads.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final supplementary, Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that. It's clear to many that we cannot afford an all-weather road into the Slave Geological Province, and that it would likely be the final blow to the Bathurst caribou herd. If our government is actually serious about caribou protection and intends to fulfil its legal obligations under the Species at Risk Act, when barren-ground caribou are listed as threatened, an all-weather road through their range should not proceed in the absence of successful recovery efforts. Can the Minister provide any assurance that this government will actually back off the unaffordable Slave Geological Province road until there is a demonstrated recovery of the Bathurst caribou herd? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: I can't talk about another Minister's department, but what I can do is talk about what ENR is doing. We are committed to protecting the caribou population by making sure that our decisions consider any potential impact on caribou herds and their habitat. We make sure we understand that, and make sure we present the information to the boards and everybody else like that. We have a strong regulatory system in place. It ensures all projects are reviewed before permits and approvals are granted, and the department actually does have comment on these projects moving forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.