

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 341-19(2): BATHURST CARIBOU HERD MANAGEMENT

June 12, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources on the Bathurst caribou emergency. Predator control can be a useful tool in recovery of the herd, but I would like to know from the Minister if he could tell us about the success of the wolf harvest incentive and the aerial shooting program, especially whether the targets were actually reached. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. ENR and the Tlicho government submitted a proposal for a joint wolf management program to help support the recovery of the Bathurst and Bluenose East herds. The Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board supported a pilot project this winter, and field work wrapped up in mid-May. While we face a number of challenges related to COVID and bad weather, we were able to complete a range of actions to support caribou recovery.

Mr. Speaker, these actions include training and incentives for wolf harvesters as part of the traditional economy, putting out 11 satellite collars to monitor wolf movement, and the aerial removal of 41 wolves from the herd's winter range. Given its low numbers and the challenges we faced this year, we have focused most of our efforts on the Bathurst herd. Mr. Speaker, because location information is still coming in from wolf harvesters and analysis is still under way, final results for the pilot project will not be available until August. At that time, we will present that information. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. It was good to see the Minister working with Indigenous leaders to condemn the illegal killing of caribou and meat wastage in March of this year. Can the Minister tell us what enforcement actions resulted from this hunting and what preventative measures this government is taking?

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: This was a very disturbing result that we had seen this past winter. I am actually going to take a bit of time to read out the whole response here, because I think that it's very important that the public hears and understands what we are doing.

ENR actively monitored the Bathurst caribou management zone, or mobile zone, throughout the winter 2019-2020 harvest season. The monitoring includes checkpoints at McKay Lake and Gordon Lake and regular ground and aerial patrols. Given an increase in harvesting on the winter road, ENR increased its presence and monitoring activities.

In late March, renewable resources officers determined that more than 80 caribou were illegally killed in the mobile zone, and wasted meat from 12 more caribou were found outside the zone. ENR officers conducted field investigations which resulted in eight ongoing investigations. Because they are active legal investigations, I cannot provide any further detail at this time on those eight cases.

In response to illegal harvesting, I worked with Tlicho Grand Chief George Mackenzie, Lutsel K'e Dene First Nations Chief Darryl Marlowe, and other Indigenous regional leaders to issue a joint statement. In this statement, we reinforced the need for responsible harvesting of caribou in this time of rapid herd decline. The government will continue to work closely with its co-management partners to implement a range of measures to support the Bathurst, including the implementation of the mobile zone.

Mr. Speaker, I have to thank the staff of ENR. They have worked really, really hard on the mobile zone, even in difficult times. I have to say that I was very disappointed to hear some of the stuff that they had to go through, but we are working with our co-management partners to address this.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that detailed response. I do commend his leadership in working with the Indigenous leaders on that issue.

As the Minister obviously knows, exploration and development in the range of the Bathurst caribou herd is probably at an all-time low, partly due to the pandemic. Now would seem to be a really good time to implement mobile caribou conservation measures that would provide temporary habitat protection. This work was called for in the Cabinet-approved Bathurst range plan. Can the Minister tell us about the status of the promised mobile caribou conservation measures and when we can expect to see them fully implemented?

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: The collaborative development of the Bathurst caribou range plan provides guidance on activities to support the range of the Bathurst caribou herd, including mobile protective measures. ENR has developed a draft framework for implementing the mobile caribou conservation measures on the range of the Bathurst herd. This framework will provide a pilot project that has been done this year to test the approach and procedures for implementing mobile measures. A possible industry partner has been identified to work with ENR to pilot the mobile measures within the late summer and fall range of the Bathurst herd, and discussions are ongoing. We will provide that information to SCEDE once we hear more information.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that. I have been pushing him on that for some time, so I look forward to getting the information.

The scheduled calving ground survey for the Bathurst caribou herd is not going to proceed this summer as a result of the pandemic. Can the Minister tell us what the management implications are for the herd now that this key population assessment tool is not going to take place? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Again, some of the challenges that we are dealing with COVID. ENR was unable to secure a research firm from Nunavut to proceed the planning calving grounds survey of the Bathurst and Bluenose East herds. The survey will be rescheduled for June 2021, which will be three years since the last survey, which is within our time frame that we do the survey. Other herd monitoring programs are able to continue, including composition surveys, monitoring radio-collared caribou, and other target research. Given the very low size of the Bathurst heard, ENR and its co-

management partners are currently doing a wide range of actions to support herd recovery. Postponement of the calving ground survey will not delay or impact current management actions, including habitat and wolf management.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform the House that I have reached out to the Minister of ENR from Nunavut, and we have had some communications back and forth. We were talking about having a phone call or a face-to-face meeting some time later this summer so that we can discuss this important activity. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.