

KEVIN O'REILLY—MLA FRAME LAKE
Barren Ground Caribou Protection
Committee of the Whole—2021-2022 Operating Budget Review
Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources—March 09, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. Let's talk about caribou. The barren-ground caribou surveys were supposed to happen last year. They didn't because of COVID. What's happening this summer? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Minister.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: We are planning to do the survey this summer. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Member.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. How much does it cost, and where is it found in the budget? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Minister.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you. For that detail, I will turn to the deputy minister. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Deputy Minister.

MS. KELLY: Thank you, Madam Chair. The surveys cost around \$430,000. They are done every two years. The budget was set up to have that funding there every two years, and now we are off-cycle because of COVID. What we are doing is we are lapsing the \$430,000 that we didn't spend on the surveys this year, and then we will be able to use that funding next year. We are going to adjust the cash flow so that that funding is available for every second year from then on. Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Member.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. I appreciate that. I just want to be crystal clear. The money can be carried over from last year to this year to allow for the survey work to be done? You don't have to cut internally, look for unused funds in other parts of ENR, or even within wildlife and fish to do the work? I just want to be really clear about that. Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Minister.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you. My understanding is: we are lapsing it this year, and then we are able to pick up the money next fiscal year to do the job that we were going to do this year. Because of COVID, we aren't able to. We do have the money. I wouldn't say we are transferring; we are lapsing it this year and getting the money next fiscal year to do the survey. For any additional detail, I will ask the deputy minister to talk about the finances to it.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Deputy Minister.

MS. KELLY: Thank you, Madam Chair. The only addition that I will make is that we will

need to put forward a supplementary request for next year, but the Department of Finance is aware that we are lapsing the funding this year and that the work needs to be done next year. Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Member.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. I will put in a good word for you guys right now with the Finance Minister that I want them to approve that, and if they don't, they will have to answer to me. I am deadly serious. These herds are in a very, very desperate state. One of the most reliable ways that we have to determine their health is through the calving ground surveys. If the work is not done, we have no idea what's going on with the overall population. I shouldn't say "no idea." Our ability to predict and project is diminished dramatically. I know I am talking to scientists about this, so they get this. We have to have that work done. I expect that all of Cabinet is going to line up behind that. I do want to ask, though, about the wildlife research and management line on page 92. There's a \$700,000 drop predicted or projected from what we spent last year. Can someone tell me why that is being reduced? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Minister.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you. \$230,000 was the Inuvik Tuktoyaktuk Highway environmental assessment funding. It was sunsetted. \$430,000 conservation and recovery of the Bathurst-Bluenose East barren-ground caribou herd. Funding fluctuates according to the calving plans. That's where that money that we had from talking about the survey. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. I appreciate that. I'll just go back and ask one other question. The \$430,000 for the barren-ground caribou surveys, does that, then, have to be brought forward through a supplementary? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Minister.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Member.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. You already have one vote. I appreciate that. I want to ask about work for caribou habitat protection. Where would I find it in the budget here? I see that there is a habitat and environmental assessment line. Is that where I would find money, how much, and what is actually being done to protect, I'll just pick on one herd, the Bathurst caribou herd?

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Minister.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: For that detail, I will turn to the deputy minister. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Deputy Minister.

MS. KELLY: Thank you, Madam Chair. My understanding is that the money for the habitat protection comes under the line item for habitat and environmental assessment.

I don't have the exact number with me that we are using on that, but it's related to the pilot project that we have provided information on previously. I don't have the exact number at this time. Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Minister.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: We'll make that commitment to get that back to committee. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair, and thanks to the Minister for that. I had understood that there were some meetings that were to take place in the fall, or maybe it was in January, with the Tlicho and some other Indigenous governments and communities to start to identify specific areas for habitat protection, critical habitat. Look, there is nothing else we can do on the harvest side, quite frankly. I do appreciate the work of the Minister and what he did in the media today, so maybe we can do some more enforcement stuff there. There's not much we can do with the harvesters to deal with that anymore. We have tried the predator stuff. That seems to have worked a little bit. The one area where we haven't done anything and is still outstanding, even in the range plan, is habitat protection. I had understood there were going to be some meetings. What is the status of that work, and have we actually started to identify areas that need to be protected, even permanently, for the Bathurst caribou herd? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Minister.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: For that level of detail, I will turn to the deputy minister. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Deputy Minister.

MS. KELLY: Thank you, Madam Chair. We have begun work on all eight recommendations in the Bathurst caribou range plan. There has been a draft framework for the implementation of mobile caribou conservation measures. That was completed in March 2020, and we are currently working with Aurora Geosciences to develop detailed operational guidance based on a pilot program, which piloted mobile caribou conservation measures in the summer and fall of 2020. We have also, as the Member stated, met with the Tlicho government and identified caribou habitat as a value at risk under our wildlife management system and also identified key boreal and barren-ground caribou habitat. It's my understanding that we are now having meetings with other Indigenous governments to get their input, as well, to include with the Tlicho input, and my understanding is that those meetings are ongoing at this time. Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, Madam Chair. Yes. I will probably have some more questions on this habitat protection, maybe later this week. However, I did want to ask about the status of transboundary work with the Government of Nunavut. The Minister did invite me to a meeting not that long ago. I guess it was about a year ago. The Nunavut

Premier was there. He is interested. There were some music groups there. Where are we at with a transboundary caribou agreement? I know the Premier of Nunavut has been diverted with some other stuff, even in his hometown, but where are we at with a transboundary caribou agreement for the Bathurst herd and maybe some of the other herds? Thanks, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Minister.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you. I will start and then turn it to the deputy minister. We have been trying to follow up on the meeting we had from last year, that the Member was invited to, a couple of Members from the House were invited to, which was really good. We had Indigenous governments. We had the Nunavut government. The Premier is the Minister of environment from Nunavut; not only is he the Premier, but he has taken that portfolio. Unfortunately, the situation has not arrived that we were able to have further conversations. As the Member talked about, he has been pretty busy in dealing with some of the challenges that are there. We are still trying to work with him. We have reached out a number of times, and we are trying to fit it into our schedule to have those conversations. However, the work for the staff, I will turn to the deputy minister.

CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler): Thank you. Deputy Minister.

MS. KELLY: Thank you, Madam Chair. I don't think that, per se, we were looking at a transboundary agreement in the sense of an agreement. We have range plans and management plans that we have collaboratively developed with Nunavut. They are a partner that we work with regularly on the implementation of those plans, like with some of the other provincial governments, as well, when the herds go across boundaries. We recognize and work very closely at the department level with the department of environment in Nunavut, and certainly, they have been involved in these multi-year processes with Indigenous governments to develop range plans and management plans for the herds. Thank you, Madam Chair.