

Backgrounder

Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board Reasons for Decision Final Report - Sahtì Ekwò (Bluenose-East caribou) Herd

The Reasons for Decision final report, entitled *Report on a Public Hearing Held by the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board 9-11 April 2019, Behchokò, NT & Reasons for Decisions Related to a Joint Proposal for the Management of the Sahtì Ekwò (Bluenose-East Caribou) Herd*, is posted on the WRRB Public Registry at <http://wrrb.ca/public-information/public-registry>.

The Reasons for Decision final report addresses management actions proposed by the Tłchq Government and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR), Government of the Northwest Territories in their *Joint Proposal on Management Actions for the Bluenose-East ?ekwò (Barren-ground caribou) Herd: 2019 – 2021*.

WRRB Mandate

- The WRRB has a mandate for wildlife, plants, forest and protected areas management in Wek'èezhì and adheres to the principles and practices of conservation in fulfilling its duties.
- The Board shares responsibilities for managing and monitoring the *Sahtì Ekwò* (Bluenose-East caribou) herd.

2019 Proceeding for the Sahtì Ekwò Herd

Joint Management Proposal

- In November 2018, GNWT reported that, based on a calving ground photographic survey conducted in June 2018, the Sahtì ekwò herd had continued to decline significantly.
- Specifically, the number of breeding females had declined from an estimated 17,396 in 2016 to 11,675 in 2018, a decrease of about 33%. The total population estimate for the herd fell from an estimated 38,592 in 2015 to 19,294 in 2018 – a decline of approximately 50%.
- In January 2019, the Tłchq Government and GNWT submitted the *Joint Proposal on Management Actions for the Bluenose-East ?ekwò (Barren-ground caribou) Herd: 2019 – 2021* to the WRRB, outlining proposed management actions for the Sahtì ekwò herd in Wek'èezhì.
- The management actions proposed were grouped under five categories: harvest, predators, habitat and land use, education, as well as research and monitoring. More specifically, Tłchq Government and GNWT proposed implementing a herd-wide total allowable harvest of 300 bulls only for the Sahtì ekwò herd.

Public Hearing on the Sahtì Ekwò Herd

- The WRRB has determined that any specific numerical restriction of a harvest or a component of harvest constitutes a total allowable harvest (TAH). A proposal for a TAH requires a public hearing under Section 12.3.10 of the Tłıchq Agreement.
- After review and analysis of the Joint Proposal, the WRRB held a public hearing in Behchokò, NT on April 9-11, 2019.

Conservation Concerns

- Throughout its proceeding, the Board heard from governments, communities and members of the public on their concerns over the decline of the Sahtì ekwò herd.
- Tłıchq and other traditional users expressed serious stewardship concerns for the Bluenose-East caribou herd. It was noted that the decline of the herd is “serious situation” and the rate of decline of the herd has not slowed since the implementation of the last management proposal in 2016.
- Vital rates associated with the herd, including the cow and calf survival rates, indicate that the herd has continued to decline and is likely to decline in the near future.
- The average cow survival rate between 2010 and 2018 was estimated to have been 79%, which is below the 84-92% associated with a stable herd. The calf to cow ratio in October 2018 was 25 calves:100 cows, which is below the 35-45 calves:100 cows associated with stable herds in October.
- Based on available Indigenous and scientific evidence, the WRRB concluded that a serious conservation concern exists for the Sahtì ekwò caribou.

WRRB Determination on TAH

- The Board believes that a serious conservation concern exists for the Sahtì ekwò herd given the high rate of decline, the accelerated decline in the number of breeding females, poor vital rates, and changing environmental conditions.
- Under the Tłıchq Agreement, the Board has sole responsibility for making a final determination with respect to a TAH for Wek’èezhìi (Section 12.5.5(a)(i) of the Tłıchq Agreement). Such action may only be taken for the purposes of conservation.
- The Board determined that a total allowable harvest of 193 bull caribou only shall be implemented for all users of the Sahtì ekwò herd within Wek’èezhìi for 2019 to 2021 by July 1, 2019, which is the start of the 2019 / 2020 harvest season.
- The Board also determined that the proportional allocation of the total allowable harvest for the Sahtì ekwò herd shall be 39.29% for Tłıchq Citizens and 60.71% for members of an Indigenous people who traditionally harvest Sahtì ekwò (includes Nunavut).
- Further, the Board determined that the Tłıchq Government should determine distribution of the allocation with Tłıchq communities and GNWT should determine

distribution of the allocation to members of an Indigenous people who traditionally harvest Sahtì ekwò in consultation with those groups.

WRRB Recommendations

- As monitoring of the Sahtì ekwò harvest is crucial for management decisions, the Board recommended that TG and GNWT revise their approach to harvest monitoring for the 2019/20 and 2020/21 harvest seasons, including collecting demographic and health information and hiring additional community monitors.
- The WRRB recommended that GNWT provide harvest information from its Enhanced North Slave *Diga* (wolf) Harvest Incentive Program and develop a framework to evaluate the effectiveness of the Program in achieving ɤekwò conservation goals.
- The WRRB also recommended monitoring *Nògha* (wolverine) populations in Wek'èezhì and working cooperatively with the Government of Nunavut to protect the calving grounds of the Sahtì ekwò from predators.
- The WRRB recommended that high priority habitat for protection of the Sahtì ekwò herd should be identified and legal protection measures should be implemented. In the interim, Mobile Caribou Conservation Measures should be implemented. Additionally, the Board recommended that TG and GNWT encourage Tḥçq citizens to harvest alternative country foods.
- The Board recommended that TG and GNWT collaborate with the WRRB to develop a herd-specific adaptive management framework with thresholds linked to specific management actions.
- The WRRB also recommended the following monitoring actions for the Sahtì ekwò herd: conduct population surveys every two years; implement pregnancy monitoring through fecal pellet collection in the winter months; cease annual reconnaissance surveys; and increase the number of collars from 50 to 70. Furthermore, the Board recommended that a detailed rationale for the collar increase be provided.
- The WRRB recommended that TG's Ekwò Nàxoède K'è program (formerly Boots on the Ground program) should be expanded to the post-calving and summer ranges of Sahtì ekwò to collect on-the-ground climate change observations.
- Finally, the Board recommended the Tḥçq Research and Monitoring Program should be implemented to ensure that both ɤekwò and ɤekwò habitat monitoring and realistic harvesting numbers are recorded in a culturally appropriate manner.