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ΓσʹϹ LΔ·:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> ◁ラᲔᲘՐኦ^Ր HACCS ΔLΔናጋჼ bLՐኦቴናሮ ፌᢧናታ ላህፈሎታ፤ና ◁▷ᡄናረነበታ ᢧሏቃዊ L፫ናጋቦና Δ/L፫▷ʔበ^Ր ¡ÞL⊀፫ሲኦፕፈና ላዜጔ Γታ′ር▷ና 2019Γ ◁ለ՚՚՚՚፡ጋՐ የለታትጉታ ማንሻጋታ ላህፈሎታውና ላቫየና/Lታኄ ▷ጲቴኒር ዜጎት ላህሰና Δኌኄኄኄጉኌና ላፕፈውና (2:1) ▷ቃኄ ላር▷/ጐ ላፕፌቴ Δኌኄኄኄጉኌና ላግነበውና (1:1),৮ HACCS bLJ/▷√ጐ ለርቴንጋታ ል፟፟፟፟ቱ ኌፚ፞፫ bበፕ/ΔͿታኄኚር ላፐላታሪታ ለቃደ ላጋናጜታ Ldላ ላርጐነ ጋታን▷ዺንና ለኦ▷ግና ለኦኮግና ላቸታናር, ▷⁵ዺኌኄኇና ላር-ቴንንር Ldላ ፌᢧልና ለኦ▷ጋላቸታናር, ላፐላታ ል፫ ነርር▷ጋበት ▷ዺጐኒና የጐ፫ ላ∬ናህ ለሰላንስና ጋታ▷ቴርውና.



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September 22, 2023

Honourable John Main Minister of Environment Government of Nunavut

Re: NWMB Decision on the Government of Nunavut's Recommendation to maintain the Total Allowable Harvest for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation

Dear Minister Main:

### **Proposal for NWMB Decision**

During the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board's (NWMB) Regular Meeting (RM003-2023) on August 29, 2023, the Government of Nunavut - Department of Environment (Department of Environment) recommended that the NWMB maintain the total allowable harvest (TAH) of 61 for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation. The NWMB considered this recommendation as well as written information it received, and the oral evidence provided at the meeting.

The recommendation follows new scientific research and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit studies. A genetic mark-recapture study led by the Government of Nunavut was concluded in 2022. The researchers analyzed genetic samples from 2017 and 2018, live-capture data from 2005 to 2007, and harvest data from 2005 to 2018. Alongside this, an Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit study took place in Pangnirtung and Kimmirut.

The Department of Environment indicated that maintaining a TAH of 61 aligns with the management objective to maintain a viable polar bear subpopulation. Their submission included three key components: (1) the science survey report, (2) the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit survey, and (3) a summary report of the Department of Environment's in-person consultations with Hunters and Trappers Organizations that harvest from the subpopulation (Kimmirut, Pangnirtung, and Iqaluit).

After considering all the evidence and arguments before the NWMB, the NWMB held an In-Camera Meeting (IC003-2023) on August 30, 2023 and made the following decision:



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**RESOLVED** that pursuant to sections 5.6.16, 5.16.17(b), and 5.3.3(a) of the Nunavut Agreement, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board modifies the overall total allowable harvest for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation from 61 to 64 polar bears.

**FURTHER RESOLVED**, to recommend that the Department of Environment lead a working group to propose solutions to issues surrounding the accumulation and use of polar bear harvest credits in Nunavut.

### **Summary of Evidence and Argument**

Input from scientific and Inuit Qaujimajatugangit studies

Between 2005 and 2007, the Government of Nunavut studied the polar bear population in the Davis Strait management unit. At that time, the population seemed stable, but the bears had fewer cubs, and their body condition was declining, possibly due to changes in habitat and increased competition for available food resources. The estimated population size for the 2005 to 2007 study was 2,250 bears.

A recent two-year study conducted in 2017 and 2018, including analysis from previous years, estimated the population size at 2,015 bears for 2017–2018. This suggests that the population may have declined slightly during this period but there was no statistically significant difference between the 2005-2007 and 2017-2018 estimate. The researchers observed during their 2017/2018 study that the bears seemed healthier. In addition, the number of cubs and yearlings per female observed appeared to indicate that there is enough to maintain the population. The survival rates were slightly lower but still within expected ranges, and there did not seem to be any evidence that the bears have been affected by environmental changes like sea-ice conditions.

Concurrently with the 2017–2018 scientific study, Inuit knowledge studies of Davis Strait polar bears were conducted in Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut. In Nunavut, the study was a collaboration between Environment and Climate Change Canada, Polar Knowledge Canada, the Government of Nunavut, and the Hunters and Trappers Organizations in Pangnirtung and Kimmirut. The study revealed that Inuit generally report a healthy polar bear population, marked by increased abundance and stable cub productivity. However, subtle signs of potential changes in polar bear health and habitat were noted, including a slight decline in fatness and occasional reports of hair loss,



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along with shifts in prey availability and sea-ice conditions. Participants in the Nunavik study revealed that bears are increasing, raised concerns about human safety and polar bear impacts on other wildlife, such as predation on young seals and eggs in bird colonies.

#### Harvest records

In 2012, the NWMB and Minister increased the Nunavut total allowable harvest from 42 to 61. The purpose of the increase was to slowly reduce the abundance while maintaining a viable population. The total allowable harvest of 61 was sub-allocated amongst Pangnirtung (24), Kimmirut (9), and Iqaluit (28).

The NWMB reviewed harvest records submitted by the Department of Environment for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation. The records show that communities have historically harvested below the total allowable harvest of 61, with an average harvest of 43 polar bears per year (70 percent of the TAH) in the last 12 years (2012–2023). Additionally, since 2012, an annual average of 1–6 bears have been killed every year in defense of life and property<sup>1</sup> (average of 2.5 bears per year).

#### Harvest credits

In Nunavut, the unharvested portion of each communities' allocation can be carried over into future years as credits. According to the 2019 Nunavut Polar Bear Co-Management Plan and the Harvest Administration and Credit Calculation System (HACCS)<sup>2</sup>, credits accumulate until a new subpopulation estimate is generated and a new total allowable harvest is established. As a result of under-harvesting the total allowable harvests, all Nunavut communities that harvest from Davis Strait have accumulated credits. At the end of the 2022-2023 harvest season, there are a total of 213 credits available for Davis Strait polar bears. Communities have occasionally requested credit tags. Even when approved, these tags often go unused. In 2023, for example, Pangnirtung used none of the 15 credit tags they requested.

<sup>1</sup> The term "Defense of Life and Property Kills" (DLP Kills) refers to the legal killing of a polar bear as a last resort to protect human life or property.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The purpose of the HACCS is to administer the polar bear harvest management in Nunavut following the decision by NWMB and Minister in 2019 to change the sex-selective harvest ratio from two males for every female (2:1) to up to one female for every male (1:1). HACCS administers the system where communities can accumulate credits for future use when the annual allocation is under-harvested, or in situations where polar bears are over-harvested, for credits to be deducted from the following year's base allocation.



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#### Consultations with affected Inuit

The Government of Nunavut shared the results of scientific and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit studies with Hunters and Trappers Organizations in Iqaluit, Kimmirut, and Pangnirtung from May 8–11, 2023. Staff from NWMB, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, and the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board attended the consultation meetings. The objective of the meetings was to present the results of the studies and seek feedback on keeping the harvest at 61 bears per year. Participants shared insights about polar bear abundance, safety, and harvest practices. Communities did not directly agree or disagree with keeping the total allowable harvest as is but expressed that they were generally content with current harvesting levels. In Iqaluit, concerns arose about deducting defense of life and property kills from the total allowable harvest. Participants said this practice limits cultural expression. Others stressed the role of Inuit knowledge in wildlife research and the need to think about human population increase and environmental changes when setting future harvest limits.

### Input from co-management partners

The NWMB considered oral and written evidence and arguments from co-management partners present during the August 2023 meeting, as well as records of community consultation attended by NWMB staff. The Board also considered Inuit responses included in the 2019 Inuit Qaujimajatugangit study.

Environment and Climate Change Canada stated that both scientific and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit studies suggest a generally healthy subpopulation. However, analysis of Inuit observations indicated that there has been decreased fatness of bears and reduced abundance of ringed seals over the last several decades. Despite harvests in Nunavut being below the total allowable harvest, the scientific study showed a slight decline in the population. Environment and Climate Change Canada emphasized the need for clear management objectives, urging the Government of Nunavut to conduct a quantitative risk assessment to assess potential risks from increased female harvest under the 1:1 sex harvest ratio.

Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. said they have no concerns about maintaining the total allowable harvest but was concerned that resetting credits to zero disincentivizes years of community stewardship. The Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board shared this view. They also stressed the need for an alternative to credit reset, noting it is unlikely communities need all available 213 credits.



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### Inter-jurisdictional considerations

Section 5.3.4 of the Nunavut Agreement instructs the NWMB to "take into account" harvesting activities outside the Nunavut Settlement Area when determining the total allowable harvest in the Nunavut Settlement Area. Outside Nunavut, polar bears from the Davis Strait subpopulation are harvested with quotas of 3 in Greenland and 12 in Nunatsiavut. No quota has been set in Nunavik. Over the past 12 years, harvest in Nunatsiavut has been 80% male, with an average of 11.25 bears per year. The exact number of bears harvested annually in Quebec is unknown but reported harvest levels between 2012/2013–2020/2021 have ranged from 4 bears per year to 61, with an average annual removal of 26 bears.

Information about polar bear management in Newfoundland and Labrador, and Quebec is publicly accessible through the Polar Bear Technical Working Group (Technical Committee) and the Polar Bear Administrative Committee (Administrative Committee) processes. Each year, the Technical Committee reports to the Administrative Committee on the status of Canada's 13 polar bear subpopulations, including Davis Strait. Based on the best available scientific information and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, this peer-reviewed report covers population estimates, harvest levels, historical and current trends, and conservation concerns. The information is current up to the 2021-2022 harvest season.

The Department of Environment's request for decision was shared with all relevant governments and wildlife Boards in Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador.

#### **Reasons for Decision**

The NWMB is assured that it had the necessary information required for making an informed decision. This includes the absence of conservation concerns raised by any involved parties, the comprehensive scientific survey through a multi-jurisdictional effort, and the lack of input from inter-jurisdictional parties. Moreover, the Board has confidence in its ability to rely on publicly available information, such as the polar bear Status Table, to fulfill its obligation to consider harvesting in other jurisdictions that share the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation, as stipulated in Section 5.3.4 of the *Nunavut Agreement*.



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The decision before the Board was to maintain the total allowable harvest for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation at 61. The *Nunavut Agreement* section 5.6.16 empowers the NWMB to modify, but not maintain, total allowable harvests. The Board asked why an NWMB decision was needed given that the Department's recommendation was to maintain the total allowable harvest at 61. The Department of Environment explained that it was important for the Board to make a decision since the abundance survey was done in 2017-2018 (more than 5 years ago). They also considered it important to set a total allowable harvest with this latest information so that the accumulated credits will reset. The Department of Environment emphasized that failing to reset the credits in alignment with the most recent survey introduces the risk of "double counting" and the potential for overharvests should the credits be used over a short period of time. The Board heard that it has been 12 years since the current total allowable harvest was set. The Board also noted that the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation has 213 unused credits, and resetting these credits to zero could disincentivize responsible harvesting practices developed through years of community stewardship.

Polar bear management in Nunavut has undergone significant changes since the last modification of the total allowable harvest in 2012. Back then, the management approach for polar bear harvest was based on a 2:1 male-to-female removal ratio under the Flexible Quota System. The current Harvest Administration and Credit Calculation System has transitioned to a 1:1 harvest ratio. This shift in management strategies played an important role in the NWMB's deliberations.

In addition to this shift, the Board also took into account the perspectives of Inuit, who expressed concerns that bears killed in defense of life and property kills towards the total allowable harvest limits their cultural expression. The records before the NWMB indicate that, on average that 2.5 bears are harvested each year due to defense of life and property reasons.

Based on the evidence and argument from parties at the NWMB as well as the science and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit studies submitted, the NWMB determined a small increase in the total allowable harvest by 3 would not lead to a population decline. Parties did not raise concerns about the population abundance of the subpopulation. The recommendation to maintain the total allowable harvest combined with the consistent under-harvesting suggests responsible harvest management and stewardship practices at the community level. The NWMB determined that it is reasonable to increase the total allowable harvest to offset cultural expression opportunities that are lost each time a bear is killed in defence of life and property.



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Relying on this evidence, the Board decided to modify the total allowable harvest for Davis Strait polar bears from 61 to 64, pursuant to Sections 5.3.3(a), 5.6.16, and 5.6.17(b) of the *Nunavut Agreement*.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Polar bear management in Nunavut is complex. The 2019 Nunavut Polar Bear Management Plan represents a significant achievement for setting out a shared vision for the approach to wildlife management. However, serious issues still need attention, such as counting polar bears killed to defend life and property as part of the total allowable harvest and the co-management administration of polar bear harvesting (and credits). In the face of these challenges, co-management partners are called to work together to chart a future of a collaborative sustainable polar bear management in Nunavut.

Considering the ongoing tension on credits and the NWMB's past urging in our decision letters to you, the Board recommends that your Department of Environment leads a working group with the aim of resolving the contentious issue of credit use in polar bear harvest management within the Nunavut Settlement Area.

The NWMB looks forward to your reply and completion of the *Nunavut Agreement* Article 5 decision-making process. If you have questions regarding this letter, do not hesitate to contact the NWMB.

Daniel Shewchuk

Jariel Kulul

Chairperson

Nunavut Wildlife Management Board

c.c. Drikus Gissing, Government of Nunavut.



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October 12, 2023

Mr. Daniel Shewchuk Chairperson Nunavut Wildlife Management Board PO Box 1379 Iqaluit, NU X0A 0H0

Re: Nunavut Wildlife Management Board's ("the Board") Decision on Davis Strait Polar Bear Total Allowable Harvest

Dear Mr. Shewchuk,

Thank you for your decision concerning the proposed Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation.

To reiterate the decision of the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB):

**RESOLVED** that pursuant to sections 5.6.16, 5.16.17(b), and 5.3.3(a) of the Nunavut Agreement, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board modifies the overall total allowable harvest for the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation from 61 to 64 polar bears.

**FURTHER RESOLVED**, to recommend that the Department of Environment lead a working group to propose solutions to issues surrounding the accumulation and use of polar bear harvest credits in Nunavut.

As per section 5.3.9(a) of the *Nunavut Agreement*, I hereby accept your decision to increase the TAH in the Nunavut settlement area of the Davis Strait polar bear subpopulation to sixty-four (64) polar bears. I will implement this TAH decision beginning July 1, 2024 at the start of the 2024-2025 harvest year and the TAH will be put into regulation and be implemented as a final decision. This decision will remain in place until I receive a new NWMB decision.

Further to the NWMB recommendation surrounding the accumulation and use of credits, my staff have already been in contact with other co-management partners to establish a working group. Recognizing that this is a complex issue, we will unlikely be able to bring



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a recommendation forward to the November 29, 2023 NWMB meeting but will endeavour to bring recommendations forward sometime in the new year.

I wish to thank the Board for their diligent work and careful consideration of this important conservation and management issue. I trust that our collaborative work will continue in the implementation of this management decision.

Sincerely,

Daniel Qavvik

Minister of Environment

Cc. Yvonne Niego, Deputy Minister, Environment