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Bluenose-East Caribou Calving Ground Survey Follow-up

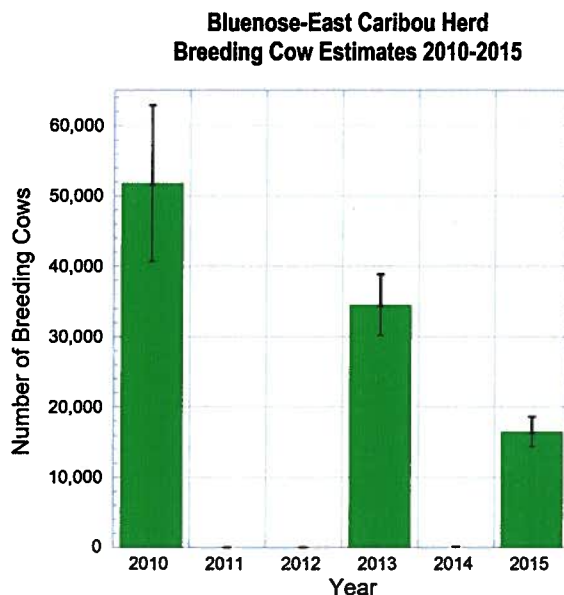
We are writing to follow-up on our letter of July 9, 2015, in which we provided you with an initial update regarding the Bathurst and Bluenose-East (BNE) caribou calving ground surveys that were conducted in June 2015. This letter focuses on the BNE herd.

As we indicated in our previous letter, the survey was done at the peak of calving with good weather and visibility. This helped ensure that we were able to collect excellent data and photographs.

Population Trend in the Bluenose-East herd:

Regrettably, the concerns we identified as a result of the 2014 reconnaissance survey findings have now been verified by the photo survey. The survey shows the following:

- The total number of breeding cows in the BNE herd has declined to about 17,000 animals. This is approximately a 50% decline from 2013, when there were approximately 34,000 breeding cows estimated in the herd.



- Fig. 1. Estimated numbers of breeding cows (± 95% CI) in the Bluenose-East herd 2010-2015.

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- A final population estimate will be available at the end of October, when a composition survey to estimate sex ratio will be carried out. We anticipate that the herd estimate will be between 35,000 and 40,000 caribou, a major decline from the 2013 estimate of 68,000 caribou.
- Additional monitoring shows indicators consistent with a declining trend:
 - The calf survival rate has been below 30 calves for every 100 cows in recent years (30-40:100 or higher is associated with a stable herd).
 - The cow survival rate continues to be below normal. An annual rate of 82-85% is needed to maintain a healthy herd and the most recent estimates show a cow survival estimate likely well below 80%.
 - There is evidence of low pregnancy rates in the herd in 2010, 2012, and 2015.

These results are alarming as the estimates show that not only is there a continued decline in the population since the 2013 calving ground photo survey, the annual rate of decline has increased in the herd from 12% for 2010-2013 to 31% for 2013-2015. The downward acceleration of the BNE herd's numbers is similar to the trend that occurred in the Bathurst herd between 2006 and 2009, when the annual rate of decline based on breeding cow estimates reached 33%. The 2015 photo survey results confirmed the steep downward trend in the BNE herd suggested by a June 2014 reconnaissance survey of this herd's calving grounds.

Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) notes that the declining trend in the Bathurst and BNE caribou herds is consistent with generally declining trends in migratory tundra caribou herds in North America: George River and Leaf River herds in Quebec/Labrador; Qaminirjuaq herd in Nunavut; Bluenose-West (BNW) herd in NWT (preliminary 2105 survey results); and the Central Arctic, Western Arctic, and Teshekpuk herds in Alaska. The Porcupine herd appears to be the lone exception with an increasing trend.

We recognize that the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board (WRRB), Sahtu Renewable Resources Board (SRRB) and other boards have processes they must follow to recommend management actions. We fully respect these processes and will participate in them as required, and will submit management proposals and supporting documents. We are mindful of the management plan completed in late 2014 for the Cape Bathurst, BNW, and BNE caribou herds by the Advisory Committee for Wildlife Management (ACCWM), which the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) supports. Given the alarming results from the June 2015 BNE survey, however, ENR suggests that short-term management of this caribou herd needs to be considered carefully.

Potential Bluenose-East Harvest Management Actions:

ENR is of the view that harvest has contributed significantly to the herd's decline in recent years and harvest reductions are one of the few actions that could directly contribute to stabilization and recovery of the herd. In August this year, the Tłıchǫ Government (TG) sent a letter to the WRRB (copied to ENR) with a number of management recommendations for the Bathurst and BNE caribou herds. We thank TG for defining their views on a number of difficult management issues. While the measures TG proposed for the Bathurst herd are beyond the scope of this letter, we thought it appropriate to note that TG proposed a total harvest limit of 950 caribou for the BNE herd, including the Nunavut harvest, for 2015-2016.

In view of the 2015 BNE caribou survey results showing an accelerated decline in the herd and the loss of about half the herd's breeding cows in just 2 years since 2013, ENR believes that continued harvest of up to 1800 caribou/year from the NWT, and up to 2800/year when the Nunavut harvest is factored in, from this herd would contribute significantly to the herd's downward trend.

After considering a number of factors, including:

- the TG recommendations of August 25, 2015 to WRRB on BNE harvest;
- the ACCWM management plan which would place the BNE herd in the orange declining phase where a Total Allowable Harvest acceptable to ACCWM can be established;
- ENR's harvest rule-of-thumb and associated modeling of harvest and caribou populations (copy attached);
- the WRRB recommendations of 2010 for this herd; and
- the herd's much reduced numbers, and its downward acceleration similar to the Bathurst herd's most rapid decline between 2006 and 2009;

ENR agrees with TG's recommended total harvest limit of 950 BNE caribou from the herd for 2015-2016. If the herd is assumed to number 37,500 (midway between the expected 35,000-40,000 total herd estimate), this is a harvest rate of 2.5% of the herd. ENR proposes, however, that this harvest be 100% bulls to recognize the paramount need to conserve the herd's breeding cows. Breeding cows are the single most important part of the herd if it is to stabilize and recover.

TG also recommended in their August 25, 2015 letter that an allocation formula based on the early 2015 allocation be used to limit the NWT BNE Aboriginal harvest to 611 caribou (Tłıchǫ 373, Sahtu 163, Dehcho 15, Inuvialuit 8, Northwest Territory Métis Nation 14, Akaitcho 20, and North Slave Métis Alliance 17). In the absence of any other allocation formula, ENR suggests that this sharing formula could be used again for winter 2015-2016.

If a more comprehensive sharing formula agreed on by co-management boards and Aboriginal governments becomes available, then this formula could be replaced with a formula accepted by all user groups.

TG's letter included a suggested allocation of 339 BNE caribou for Nunavut. ENR has no authority in Nunavut and any recommendations on Nunavut harvest of the BNE would need to follow a process appropriate to that territory's land claim and governance. The overall approach suggested by TG for allocation of BNE harvest appears reasonable, and GNWT will continue discussions with Government of Nunavut (GN) on a coordinated approach to management of this trans-boundary herd.

As the BNE herd appears to be repeating the downward acceleration that has occurred in the Bathurst herd, we suggest that action on harvest reduction is absolutely critical to prevent further rapid decline. We invite your input on the harvest management proposed by TG and the suggestions that we have proposed here.

Other management measures for the BNE herd:

The ACCWM caribou management plan of 2014 identifies actions that could be taken in areas other than harvest, and we invite your recommendations on these areas that could be taken in the short-term and medium-term, such as increasing education programs, actions to protect habitat, and predator management. To further this goal we have provided support to the ACCWM to assist in developing an Action Plan for the BNE herd.

Over the past year we have been working on implementing recommendations for additional actions put forward by political leaders during meetings on the BNE and Bathurst herds in fall and winter 2014-2015. These include:

- Participating in environmental assessments and land use planning processes to encourage the protection of caribou calving grounds and other important caribou habitat; this included supporting the GN's opposition to the Tundra Copper proposed activity on the BNE calving ground under a Nunavut Impact Review Board process, and supporting the GN's opposition to development on any caribou calving grounds at a meeting on the Nunavut Land Use Planning Commission (meeting in Iqaluit June 2015);
- Leading a multi-party range planning process to develop land use recommendations for the Bathurst range; such a planning process could in future be extended to the BNE herd;

- Developing frameworks for monitoring, assessing, and managing cumulative effects on NWT caribou herds;
- Enhanced education/communication regarding the serious issues facing caribou;
- Enhancing community monitoring and enforcement activities (i.e. joint community monitors, joint check stations, organized "sight your rifle" events, etc.); and
- Enhanced communication regarding the existing system and the need to report wolf/caribou interaction, sightings, and prioritizing the collection of harvest data information.

TG in their letter to WRRB of August 25, 2015 noted that efforts to date to decrease wolf predation by increasing wolf harvest on the Bathurst range have been ineffective, as very few wolves have been taken. ENR recognizes that reduction of predators, primarily wolves, are among the few actions that may have direct effects on survival rates of caribou adults and calves. ENR would be prepared to discuss more intensive efforts to reduce numbers of wolves and could take the lead on a feasibility assessment of wolf management options to benefit the BNE and other caribou herds. We note that wolf control elsewhere has been controversial and that public views on wolf control are often very polarized and may require further public consultation; however, we agree with TG's suggestion that this is an appropriate time to consider a full range of potential actions on predators, in view of the continuing declines in the BNE and other NWT caribou herds.

We request your input on potential management actions that could be taken both in the short-term and longer-term to address the rapid decline of the BNE herd. Given the pending fall harvest season, we would ask you to provide us with your input for at least the 2015-2016 season by October 15, 2015.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ernie Campbell', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Ernie Campbell
Deputy Minister

Attachments

Distribution List Attached.

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Mr. Jeff Walker, Superintendent, Sahtu Region, ENR
Mr. Stephen Charlie, Superintendent, Inuvik Region, ENR
Mr. Carl Lafferty, Superintendent, Dehcho Region, ENR
Mr. Troy Ellsworth, Superintendent, South Slave Region, ENR
Ms. Lynda Yonge, Director, Wildlife Division, ENR
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