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March 26, 2021

Hon. Joe Savikataaq Minister of Environment, Government of Nunavut

Dear Minister Savikataaq:

Re: NWMB Decision on the Government of Nunavut's Proposal to Establish a Total Allowable Harvest of 74 polar bears for the Gulf of Boothia subpopulation

NWMB Decision

At the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board's (NWMB or Board) Regular Meeting (RM001-2021) on March 10, 2021, your department presented a proposal requesting that the Board establish a Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) of 74 polar bears for the Gulf of Boothia polar bear subpopulation, thereby maintaining the current harvest limit. During the Board's In-Camera Meeting (IC001-2021), on March 11, 2021, the Board considered your department's proposal, along with (1) a report of the 2015–2017 Government of Nunavut study to estimate the Gulf of Boothia subpopulation abundance, (2) an account of Government of Nunavut in-person consultations with Hunters and Trappers Organizations in Gjoa Haven, Sanirajak, Igloolik, Kugaaruk, Naujaat, and Taloyoak, (3) an Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit study on Gulf of Boothia polar bears commissioned by the Government of Nunavut, and (4) oral submissions by comanagement partners at the Regular Meeting. The Board made the following decision:

RESOLVED that the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board defers its decision on the Total Allowable Harvest for the Gulf of Boothia polar bear subpopulation pending the outcome of ongoing consultations on the polar bear Harvest Administration and Credit Calculation System (HACCS), which is anticipated to come to the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board for review and approval soon.

NWMB Consideration

In reaching its decision, the Board considered the following arguments and evidence:



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Science subpopulation abundance study

The Board assessed and considered evidence from the Government of Nunavut's 2015–2017 study to estimate the subpopulation abundance of Gulf of Boothia polar bears. The study estimated an abundance of 1525 (standard error = 1231–1819), similar to the 1998–2000 estimate of 1592. The study suggested that Gulf of Boothia polar bears are in better body condition than in 1998–2000. The proportion of adult females relative to males was reported to have increased from 0.57 (1998–2000) to 0.61 (2015–2017), consistent with model-based predictions of a declining male population in the Gulf of Boothia under the 2:1 sex-selective harvest. The study also showed good reproductive performance with a cub-of-the-year litter size of 1.61 (range = 1.51–1.70) and yearling litter size of 1.53 (range = 1.41–1.61).

Based on the Government of Nunavut's report, the Board considered that the Gulf of Boothia polar bear subpopulation is healthy and productive given the estimated subpopulation size, the body condition index, and the reproductive performance indices. The number of offsprings per female were higher than those reported for Baffin Bay, Foxe Basin, Southern Hudson Bay, and the Chukchi Sea subpopulations, indicating that the Gulf of Boothia subpopulation is productive.

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit study

The Board reviewed an Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit study conducted by the Government of Nunavut. The report was based on interviews with Inuit in all six communities that harvest from the Gulf of Boothia polar bear subpopulation. Interviewees stated that the Gulf of Boothia polar bear subpopulation has increased relative to the 1970s; that people are seeing a lot of healthy polar bears, including females and young bears; that noise from shipping activities is a threat to polar bears; that the "solid ice" is disappearing faster; and bears come to the land sooner but changing ice conditions are unlikely to affect bears. Most interviewees were concerned that polar bear management decisions are most often made without considering Inuit knowledge and wisdom, including the cultural relationship between humans and polar bears. The Board is aware that interview participants were not directly asked to comment on the Government of Nunavut's TAH recommendation.

Harvest Records and Credits Status

The current TAH for Gulf of Boothia is shared by six Inuit communities as follows:

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Igloolik (11), Sanirajak (4), Kugaaruk (24), Talojoak (25), Gjoa Haven (5) and Naujaat (5). The Board considered evidence provided by the Government of Nunavut concerning the harvesting of polar bears from the Gulf of Boothia between 2009–2019. These records show that the average harvest rate since 2019 remains below the harvest limit—at 63 bears per year over the past five years. Board members asked the Government of Nunavut why the full TAH is not being harvested. The Board heard that under the 2:1 harvest sex ratio, some communities stopped harvesting once female tags were used up to prevent over-penalization under the Flexible Quota System (the 2:1 Harvest sex ratio was changed in 2019). The Board also heard that rough ice conditions also played a role by restricting access to "prime harvesting locations."

As a result of harvesting below the Total Allowable Harvest for ten years, communities harvesting from the Gulf of Boothia subpopulation have accumulated 119 male and 22 female credits as of the end of the 2019–2020 harvest season. The Government of Nunavut explained that credits would be zeroed if the NWMB and Minister set a new TAH because the new population estimate and recommended TAH considers all bears in the subpopulation.

Oral Submissions at the Regular Meeting from Co-management Partners

At the NWMB Regular Meeting, the Board heard and considered oral arguments from its co-management partners. Environment and Climate Change Canada expressed that the current quota of 74 was based on modelling that assumed a harvest sex ratio of two males for every one female. Therefore, the proposed recommendation to maintain the TAH to be harvested at a sex ratio of one male for every one female could lead to long-term population declines, as "adult females are the most important contributors to population growth." Environment and Climate Change Canada recommended that a quantitative harvest risk assessment be conducted in advance of a TAH decision to inform management objectives and the proposed TAH.

The Board heard from the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board, who stated that the Government of Nunavut consultations with affected communities were incomplete or insufficient because credit reset was not raised and discussed at the consultation meetings. The Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board further presented a motion, requesting the Board "delay a new decision on the TAH for Gulf of Boothia polar bears until after the communities, and Regional Wildlife Organizations have been fully informed of the effects on their credits, and have time to reply to the NWMB on this issue." In response to the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board's position and motion to adjourn, the Government of Nunavut stated that credit reset following a new TAH is in line with the Interim Flexible Quota System and



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was not necessarily the subject of the consultations. The Government of Nunavut also pointed out that the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board was present at the consultation meetings and could have raised the credit reset issue if they considered it was relevant to the TAH recommendation.

Reasons for NWMB Decision

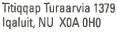
Based on the Government of Nunavut's submissions and oral submissions from comanagement partners during the Regular Meeting, the Board determined that the Gulf of Boothia polar bear subpopulation is healthy and productive. However, the Board could not ignore the credit issue raised by the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board and supported by other Regional Wildlife Organizations. At the end of the 2019–2020 harvest season, communities that harvest from the Gulf of Boothia polar bear subpopulation have accumulated 119 male and 22 female credits that will be reset once a new TAH is set. Therefore, the Board decided to defer its decision making on the Gulf of Boothia polar bear TAH pending the outcome of ongoing consultations on the polar bear Harvest Administration and Credit Calculation System, which is anticipated to come to the NWMB for review soon. Moreover, the Board determined that a delay to its TAH decision making will not negatively impact Inuit harvesting rights as the current TAH is the same as the TAH recommended by the Government of Nunavut, and harvesting has been below the quota for the past ten years.

Board determinations on request to discuss tag allocation with all affected communities

In the Government of Nunavut's briefing note to the Board, they recommended that "Regional Wildlife Boards (RWOs) should discuss the tag allocation with all communities that harvest from both the Gulf of Boothia and the M'Clintock Channel subpopulations." During the Regular Meeting, the Government of Nunavut stated that their recommendation was in response to some participants at the consultation stating that their appeal to the Regional Wildlife Organizations to increase their community tags has not been considered. The Board determined that the Government of Nunavut should voice their concerns directly to the Regional Wildlife Organizations.

Conclusion

The NWMB looks forward to your reply and prompt completion of the Nunavut





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Agreement Article 5 decision-making process. If you have any questions regarding this letter, please do not hesitate to contact the NWMB.

Sincerely,

Daniel Shewchuk

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Chairperson

Nunavut Wildlife Management Board

cc: Drikus Gissing, Government of Nunavut.

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