

Caribou Range Planning

Mr. Speaker, this government made a commitment at the beginning of this Legislative Assembly to support the effective co-management of our caribou herds. As you know, many of our herds are experiencing rapid declines and it is our shared responsibility as a government and a territory to promote their recovery.

Range plans are a vital part of how we work together to co-manage our caribou herds and provide guidance to decision-makers, developers and communities to manage activities on the land in a way that supports healthy caribou populations.

Mr. Speaker, today after years of work, I am pleased to officially release two new range planning documents, the *Bathurst Caribou Range Plan* and the *Framework for Boreal Caribou Range Planning*. These documents provide important tools to protect the habitat of our vulnerable caribou populations and fulfill an important mandate commitment made by this Legislative Assembly.

Barren-ground caribou populations have historically experienced periods of highs and lows, but of all the barren-ground herds, the Bathurst caribou herd has suffered the most dramatic decline – from a high of 450,000 animals in the mid-1980s to a current low of about 8,200 caribou. This is despite extensive efforts to support conservation and promote herd recovery. The *Bathurst Caribou Range Plan* is a response to calls for action to help the herd recover and ensure its habitat remains healthy. It includes guidance for managing the overall disturbance on the land and tools to reduce and manage impacts to caribou and caribou habitat.

It is also an attempt to balance these recovery efforts with the benefits of industrial development. Human activities and land use need to be managed carefully, Mr. Speaker, particularly when caribou numbers are low and more vulnerable to disturbance. Range planning helps establish certainty around land use, which is critical to achieving both conservation and development goals, and contributes to a strong and prosperous territory.

Twenty-one (21) organizations and co-management partners worked together to develop the *Bathurst Caribou Range Plan* over five years, Mr. Speaker. This included all levels of government and Indigenous organizations, as well as co-management boards, industry and environmental groups. The plan is based on knowledge and perspectives grounded in both traditional knowledge and science, and I am very grateful to everyone involved for their hard work and dedication.

The Range Plan for Bathurst caribou looks to Northerners as caribou guardians and recognizes the shared responsibility for managing development to support the recovery of the herd. Applying this plan effectively as part of land use decisions will require a genuine commitment from governments, organizations, developers, communities and individuals across multiple jurisdictions.

In the next few days, we will also be releasing *A Framework for Boreal Caribou Range Planning*. This document will guide the development of five regional range plans for boreal caribou in the Northwest Territories. These are the caribou that live in the forest east of the Mackenzie Mountains. They are listed as a threatened species under both federal and territorial legislation.

This Framework was developed with our co-management partners, and includes a 'made-in-the-North' approach to managing boreal caribou and their habitat. While the Northwest Territories population of boreal caribou is currently considered stable overall, careful management of habitat disturbance will be important to maintain a healthy and sustainable population for the future.

The regional range plans developed under this Framework will help ensure there is enough forest across the Northwest Territories to support a healthy and sustainable population of boreal caribou.

The Framework is a critical step, but is just the beginning. Work to develop regional range plans can now get underway and will begin in the Southern Northwest Territories and Wek'èezhì regions, where there is more wildfire and industrial activity, followed by the Sahtú, Gwich'in and Inuvialuit regions. Each plan will be developed in collaboration with our co-management partners, and is expected to take at least two years to complete.

The Government of the Northwest Territories remains committed to managing the land and natural resources of the Northwest Territories in a way that is sustainable, responsible and responsive – relying on shared tools like this Framework and Range Plan to make effective decisions within our strong co-management and regulatory system.

I am confident both of these documents provide effective tools and approaches for protecting caribou in the Northwest Territories and I look forward to seeing them in action as we work with our partners to help implement them successfully.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.