

Porcupine Caribou Management Board Minutes of Meeting

Via Zoom

November 27, 2020

In attendance

Members/Staff

Joe Tetlich, Chair
Robert Charlie, Gwich'in Tribal Council
Alice McCulley, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in
Billy Storr, Inuvialuit Game Council
Karen Clyde, Government of Yukon
Shannon Stotyn, Government of Canada
Steven Buyck, First Nation of Na-Cho Ny'ak Dun
Norman Snowshoe, Government of the Northwest Territories (Alternate)
Deana Lemke, Executive Director
Matthias Lemke, Assistant

Presenters and Guests

Mike Sutor, Environment Yukon
Jennifer Smith, Consultant
Liz Staples, VGFN Caribou Coordinator
Shawn Hughes, Environment Yukon

Regret

Harold Frost Jr., Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation

Call to Order

Chair Joe Tetlich called the meeting to order at 12:49 p.m.

Motion to approve agenda

Moved by Billy Storr

Seconded by Robert Charlie

Carried

Review Minutes

The minutes of the June 24, 2020 meeting were reviewed and approved.

Motion to approve minutes of the June 24, 2020 meeting

Moved by Robert Charlie

Seconded by Karen Clyde

Carried

Chair's Update

Joe Tetlichy recounted that during his visit to Old Crow in mid-September, groups of caribou arrived near the community and harvesters began harvesting caribou. In early November, even more caribou moved through the Old Crow area. The herd had been in Alaska and then began moving east into Crow Flats. This year, caribou arrived near the Dempster Highway about 10 days later than last year.

Joe related that he had driven up the Dempster Highway during the week of November 16. Some small groups of caribou were present between the NWT border and Rock River, but harvesters had to travel up to 10 kilometers off the highway to get caribou. Joe noted that harvesters were bringing caribou back to the highway to process them. Joe hopes this practice can be changed with good education and by working with RRCs to ask harvesters not to leave gut piles near the highway.

Joe informed Board members that a wooden storage container for orange safety vests has been constructed and placed in the gravel pit at Crow Mountain to encourage the use of safety vests while harvesting. Harvesters are free to borrow a vest to use during their harvesting excursion. Joe felt that it may be a good idea to do this in harvesting areas along the Dempster Highway and near Aklavik as well. PCMB paid the cost to construct the storage box. Signs with PCMB and North Yukon Renewable Resource Council logos will be affixed to the box to show partnership related to hunter safety and education.

While attending an RRC meeting in Old Crow, Joe took note of people's concerns regarding the eligibility of other First Nations to harvest Porcupine Caribou. The possibility of an eligibility list was discussed. He related that Conservation Officers who patrol the Dempster Highway ask harvesters to present their status cards in order to determine if they are eligible to harvest Porcupine Caribou. Vuntut Gwichin First Nation has created a consent form that can be used, but the overall issue of how to manage other First Nation harvesters is still being considered.

Deana Lemke noted that she had assisted the Old Crow RRC with an information mailout package for harvesters and had customized some of the information from PCMB's hunter education package for this purpose. Some draw prizes were also sent to Old Crow to be used at a hunter education event.

Administrative and Financial Update

Deana Lemke reviewed the year-to-date financial report and informed Board members about adjustments being made to the funding agreement with the federal Climate Change Preparedness in the North Program (CCPNP) due to changes in timelines resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Approval has been received, but the funding agreement is still being adjusted and is not in place yet. CCPNP indicated that the agreement should be finalized in December.

Since honoraria and travel costs will be significantly lower than usual during this fiscal year, additional expenditures for promotional supplies will be planned.

Deana pointed out that additional website development costs will also be recorded once the new websites are finalized. She is still working with Aasman on both of the new sites and is hoping that Liz Staples will take on the task of regularly updating thelastgreatherd.com. The new PCMB site is almost ready and any feedback from Board members would be appreciated.

Deana noted that, so far, harvest data has still not been received from all Parties. Reminders have been sent out. Deana encouraged Board members to work with their respective communities to follow up on reporting harvest data.

Joe related that Catherine Pinard has been contracted to improve reporting processes for Inuvialuit harvest data.

Deana explained that the next milestone in the HMP schedule is the release of the PCTC Annual Summary Report which was expected in the last few weeks. Once it is received it will be attached to a letter that will be sent out to Parties regarding the next Annual Harvest Meeting (AHM).

Shannon Stotyn noted that the contract under which Arctic Borderlands Ecological Knowledge Society (ABEKS) is currently operating requires that they provide a presentation at the AHM. Deana noted that Heather from ABEKS has reached out to her already regarding this and that they plan to provide information at the AHM. The Board will then have another opportunity to provide feedback about the usefulness of the data and how it could be presented in a relevant format. Members noted that it would be most helpful if ABEKS could help interpret the data, make it relevant, and add context.

The forum for the upcoming AHM was discussed in relation to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While community participation will be a challenge, it was proposed that the AHM go ahead via online video-conference, with Parties making submissions and presentations via Zoom.

Deana confirmed that the dates that had been identified are February 9 for the public meeting and February 10 for the Parties meeting with PCMB. She noted that it may be possible to start deliberations with the Parties on the first day. Whether a third day will be required is not known. Additionally, since no travel will be involved for the 2021 AHM, Deana asked members to provide feedback on whether or not a PCMB meeting should be held separately. Billy Storr recommended shorter but more frequent (monthly) board meetings.

Robert stated that he will reach out to RRCs to see if they are equipped to participate using Zoom. He suggested that RRCs have an important role in

wildlife management and that it would be wise for PCMB to try to engage them by sharing information.

Deana stated that each RRC does get an invitation and information package that outlines the AHM process along with a comment sheet, in hopes of engaging them. In the past, some RRCs have asked about funding. The Board does not fund stakeholders' attendance at AHMs but is happy to include them and recognize them as participants.

Terms and appointments:

- Billy Storr renewed for IGC
- Ian MacDonald appointed as alternate for Canada
- GNWT appointment continues to be vacant (Norman Snowshoe as alternate)

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge development update

Liz Staples reviewed the progress of oil and gas development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, beginning with the Draft Environmental Impact Statement up to the current status related to lease sales. She then provided the following additional information:

- A Record of Decision (ROD) was released on August 17, 2020, with the most aggressive alternative having been chosen. All PCMB Parties submitted comments which are posted on thelastgreatherd.com and pcmb.ca websites.
- On September 3, 2020 response strategies were discussed at a leadership meeting.
- The ROD is subject to a judicial review and two lawsuits were initially filed regarding the environmental review process. Two additional lawsuits were subsequently filed, also challenging the processes that led to the ROD. Litigation will likely be ongoing until spring of 2021.
- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) can still proceed with the lease sale process while the litigation is taking place.
- The lease sale process officially started on November 17, 2020 when a call for nominations was released. This allows for a comment period on specific tracts of land that are to be made available for leasing.
- Mike Suitor has analyzed historical Porcupine Caribou location data and has provided data that shows how much each tract of land has historically been used by the herd. The Parties are still reviewing this information and will be using it to provide comments during the comment period.
- After the December 17, 2020 deadline for comments, the next step will be the lease sale notice and a detailed statement of sale. This must be released 30 days prior to the scheduled date of the sale. It is possible that this might be issued even before the call for nominations is completed.

- A lease sale could take place as early as January 17, 2021. The inauguration of Joe Biden takes place on January 20, 2021.
- Joe Biden has stated that he will restore protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; however, it is uncertain how protection can be restored because the U.S. Senate will still have a republican majority.
- The seismic exploration program has been scheduled after the two-week public comment period concluded. Parties submitted comments expressing concerns about the timing of seismic and clean up activities conflicting with calving and post-calving use of the area.
- It is hoped that authorizations to begin seismic work will be delayed until President Biden can influence the outcome.
- There is a small chance that it will not be possible to revoke the leases if the process is expedited by the current administration and leases are signed before January 20, 2021. Leases would then need to be retracted through the courts.

Additionally, Liz related that there has been some good media coverage about statements made by ministers of Canada, the Northwest Territories, and Yukon. Additionally, the United Nations has called for an investigation of human rights violations of the Gwich'in people. A campaign to lobby financial institutions resulted in four major banks adopting policies stating that they will not finance oil and gas exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

As all comments on the call for nominations must be submitted via physical mail, Liz Staples offered to have Parties' correspondence hand-delivered by a friend in Anchorage.

Overview of Seismic Program

Mike Sutor explained that the greatest concerns about the seismic program are related to direct habitat impacts, disturbance of calving before May 31, and the disturbance caused by clean-up activities during summer.

Using historical caribou location data overlaid on the program area map, Mike demonstrated where and at what time caribou have arrived. The data clearly indicates that many caribou are present during the last week of May.

Mike explained that spooking of large post-calving aggregations of caribou during early summer could result in young calves being trampled.

Members thanked Mike for the information and the way it was presented. It will be helpful to inform the responses that Parties will send to the Bureau of Land Management in Alaska.

Conservation Officer Update on Dempster Hunting

Conservation Officer Shawn Hughes filled in for Kirby Meister to provide an update to the Board on recent hunting activities on the Dempster Highway.

Shawn was personally present on the Dempster Highway from the first weekend in November through to Remembrance Day. He related that many people had based their decision to go hunting on the published PCH location data, which indicated that caribou seemed to be available near the Yukon-NWT border.

However, not many hunters were successful because caribou were quite far away from the highway. As caribou came closer to the road and hunters began travelling farther, more caribou were harvested.

Officers continued to patrol the highway November 13 - 21. On average, between 10 to 40 people were out hunting each day and between five to 40 animals were taken per day.

While no charges were made, a few conflicts between hunters had to be addressed. Some hunters were not aware that there is no longer a 500-metre corridor along the highway and that shooting from the vicinity of the highway is allowed. Some complaints were raised about hunters using snowmobiles while others who had to walk felt disadvantaged. One unresolved incident included a hunter having the tires on his trailer slashed. Additionally, several hunters who were on foot were caught off guard by bad weather and had to be rescued. Four caribou were lost due to short daylight hours and the consequences of hunting near twilight.

Karen Clyde related that she had just returned from hunting on the Dempster Highway after successfully getting caribou. She noted that it was interesting to see the demographics of hunters, which included a group of six women, some younger hunters, and some groups who were outfitted with very expensive equipment. Karen stated that her interaction with harvesters from Fort McPherson was very positive and that she did not have any negative experiences.

Joe pointed out that some frustrations can arise when harvesting is taking place in Yukon but harvesters from Fort McPherson cannot access caribou because the ice road is not safe to cross.

Shawn related that a sight-in-your-rifle (SIYR) event had been planned for the Remembrance Day weekend. The intention was to give out prizes and have a heated trailer available to have discussions with hunters. Due to pandemic restrictions the event was cancelled.

Deana Lemke noted that a hunter education event was held in Old Crow on October 31. It was organized by the North Yukon RRC and PCMB sent several prizes, promotional items, and educational information to support the event.

Billy Storr felt that it would be a good time to send orange vests and some prizes to the Aklavik HTC and to support a SIYR event because people are still harvesting. He stated that the bulls and cows that have been taken so far were in good condition. Billy also related that not as many biological sample kits were available as could have been used.

NWT Herd Update

Norman Snowshoe stated that the Dempster Highway river crossing was still officially closed when the caribou arrived on the Yukon side this year. The check station was not set up because of the late arrival of caribou. While there were some unofficial river crossings at Fort McPherson, officers could not perform patrols because government employees are only allowed to cross the river when the ice bridge is officially open. Once the ice roads were open patrols were conducted on the Dempster Highway and in the Aklavik area.

Norman noted that on November 19 a group of harvesters were able to take over 150 caribou near Canoe Lake, west of Aklavik. Further harvest was estimated at over 100 caribou on November 21; 13 caribou on November 23; 17 caribou on November 24; and 30 caribou on November 25. Considering the number of caribou harvested, there were very few issues: one abandoned caribou at Canoe Lake, one diseased animal.

Norman related that a very negative Facebook post was made by an individual from Fort McPherson regarding harvesting by other indigenous groups. While the post was condemned by local residents, Norman felt that it would be good for additional educational information to be provided by PCMB to clarify PCH harvesting rights.

Billy Storr agreed that continual education is needed in this regard, and that while certain individuals may act inappropriately this should not reflect on the whole community.

Yukon Herd Update

Mike Sutor provided a herd update based on satellite movement data. He noted that this year the herd followed the same routes, but unlike last year caribou were separated into many little groups. By mid-September almost the entire herd was located near Arctic Village and Venetie, Alaska. The herd then moved consistently eastward and crossed back into Yukon north of Old Crow and moved toward the Richardson Mountains. These types of movements are similar to the 1980s when the herd was also at a high population. Reports indicate that

some of the cows were very skinny. Mike felt that this was not surprising considering the distance they have traveled in a short time.

Mike explained that in order to understand the effect of climate change on herd's use of habitat, the influence of spring phenology and the implications of changes in climate is being studied. In order to predict which areas of the range will be most important in the future, it is necessary to understand what caribou are looking for and why they prefer certain areas. Based on current studies caribou appear to prefer areas with shrubs, low snow during calving, while greenness and NDVI was most important during post-calving.

Using phenology data, predictions of calving and post calving locations were made for previous years and then compared to actual calving and post calving locations in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The results showed that the prediction models were quite accurate. Mike noted that the models are predicting that habitat in Alaska will become better than habitat in Yukon. It is therefore likely that the herd's entire post-calving period will be spent in Alaska. This information adds even more emphasis to the importance of the 1002 area.

Yukon North Slope Wildlife Conservation and Management Plan (WCMP) update

Jennifer Smith updated the Board on behalf of WMAC (NS) regarding the Wildlife Conservation and Management Plan for North Slope. The plan is in the final stages and is nearing completion.

Regarding wildlife the key priorities of the plan are:

- Protect caribou calving and post-calving grounds and summer habitat
- Conserve large tracts of undisturbed land that encompass diverse ecosystems
- Conserve specific habitat types and areas that are vital for wildlife populations
- Maintain the information base on wildlife–habitat relationships

Jennifer explained that the conservation requirements for wildlife habitat identified in the plan should be incorporated into management plans and used to guide decisions and assess risks from development and other activities.

As climate conditions change and as further knowledge is gathered, habitat conservation requirements in the plan will be updated. Research and monitoring priorities should also be informed by the conservation requirements set out in the plan.

The draft WCMP has been reviewed by GTC, GRRB, and VGFN as well as all the Parties and their comments have been incorporated. The plan will soon be ready to pass on to Yukon Government for public engagement.

Jen noted that she hopes to have an update at the February 2021 PCMB meeting. She stated that PCMB's initial letter of support was helpful and that WMAC (NS) would appreciate another letter from PCMB at this stage.

PCH Conservation Plan and TK Data-Mobilization Project Update

Jennifer Smith updated the Board regarding progress on the Conservation Plan (CP) and the TK Data-Mobilization Project. She noted that progress has been slower than anticipated and that the timeline and plan have had to adjust due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next phase of the Conservation Plan project will be the initial community engagement. Until recently the plan had been to go to Yukon communities in person; however, this step had to be changed to a remote engagement.

The plan now is for a semi-virtual engagement of all PCH user communities in Yukon and NWT. The goal of the initial engagement will be to introduce the CP and ask for preliminary feedback. RRCs, HTC's, and other stakeholder organizations will be consulted to assist with engagements in the communities. Presentations will be made through video-conference to small groups, facilitated and supported by a person from the community.

Letters will be sent to the Parties to begin the engagement process. Engagement methods can be adjusted to meet the needs of each community regarding both COVID-19 mindfulness and community-specific communication for each user group.

After initial community feedback has been gathered the team will use the information to develop further draft materials for review during the second engagement. Trailmark will hopefully have TK data for review during the second engagement as well.

So far, Trailmark has ingested all available GTC data. They are still working with VGFN to finish ingesting and categorizing Vuntut data. A data-sharing agreement with WMAC (NS) and the Aklavik HTC is being worked on to facilitate the ingestion of Inuvialuit data. This process involves obtaining re-consent from certain TK holders. These need to be contacted in order to seek permission to use their data for this project. In the meantime, Trailmark has been asked to use the ingested GTC data to demonstrate how TK data could be used and integrated into the CP.

Deana suggested that another meeting be scheduled to focus specifically on the engagement process and that all members and their alternates could be invited.

Next Meeting and Adjournment

A follow-up meeting via Zoom will potentially be scheduled for the second week of December and will include alternates.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:35 p.m.