



WHAT WE HEARD:

Range Plan for Boreal Caribou in the Northwest Territories: Wek'èezhìi Region

June 2026

Une version française de ce document est disponible

K'áhshó got'íne xədə k'é hederí ɔedjhtl'é yeriníwə ní dé dúle.

Dene Kádá

ʔerihł'ís Dëne Sų́líné yatı t'a huts'elkër xa beyáyatı theɔą ɔat'e, nuwe ts'en yóltı.

Dëne Sų́líné

Edı gondı dehgáh got'je zhatié k'éé edat'éh enahddhę nıde naxets'é edahlı.

Dene Zhatié

Jii gwandak izhii ginjik vat'atr'ijáhch'uu zhit yinoththan ji', diits'át ginohkhii.

Dinjii Zhuh Ginjik

Uvanittuaq ilitchurisukupku Inuvialuktun, ququaqluta.

Inuvialuktun

Č'ɔɔ ɔɔɔ'ɔɔɔ ɔɔɔ ɔɔɔɔɔɔɔ ɔɔɔɔɔɔɔ ɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔ, ɔɔɔɔɔɔɔ ɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔɔ.

Inuktitut

Hapkua titiqqat pijumagupkit Inuinnaqtun, uvaptinnut hivajarlutit.

Inuinnaqtun

kīspin ki nitawihtīn ē nīhīyawihk ōma ācimōwin, tipwāsinān.

nēhiyawēwin

Tłıchq yatı k'èè. Dı wegodı newq dè, gots'o gonede.

Tłıchq

Indigenous Languages

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Introduction:

Boreal caribou play an important role in the lives of people in the Northwest Territories (NWT). They are highly valued from a spiritual, cultural, and harvesting perspective. On a spiritual level, Indigenous people hold tremendous respect toward boreal caribou, and for many non-Indigenous people, boreal caribou are an indicator of a healthy ecosystem and a symbol of the North.

In the NWT, and the Wek'èezhì region more specifically, there is still a great deal of intact habitat and a relatively healthy population of boreal caribou. However, careful land management, guided by range plans, will help ensure that habitat is maintained to support a sustainable caribou population into the future.

The development of Wek'èezhì Boreal Caribou Range Plan (the Range Plan) was guided by the *NWT Framework for Boreal Caribou Range Planning* (the Framework) and extensive input from the *Wek'èezhì Boreal Caribou Range Plan Working Group* (the Working Group). Throughout the development of the Range Plan, the Working Group has followed the principles from the Framework. This includes being informed by the best available traditional knowledge, local knowledge, and scientific information as well as being guided by people's relationship with caribou as they relate to social, economic, and cultural well-being of people in the NWT.

Background:

Under both the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) and territorial *Species at Risk (NWT) Act*, boreal caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) are listed as threatened. As such, a recovery strategy focusing on critical habitat for boreal caribou must be developed. As part of implementing the recovery strategy, the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) committed to writing five regional range plans in the NWT. The Wek'èezhì Boreal Caribou Range Plan is the first of these five regional plans.

Documents Engaged On:

- [Have Your Say](#)
- [Draft Wek'èezhì Boreal Caribou Range Plan](#)
 - [Appendix A. Current Status of Boreal Caribou](#)
 - [Appendix B. Seasonal Boreal Caribou Habitat Selection Maps](#)
 - [Appendix C. Using Marxan to Delineate Important Areas for Boreal Caribou](#)
 - [Appendix D. Exploring Different Range Plan Scenarios](#)

Engagement Process:

The Wek'èezhì Range Plan is the culmination of six years of work and has undergone significant engagement in the NWT. The process began with an interim boreal caribou range plan ([Interim Plan](#)), which was approved and published in March 2022. This Range Plan has been further developed and updated to replace the Interim Plan, which has been used for the past four years.

The Interim and final Range Plans were developed collaboratively by the Working Group, which held 11 meetings between November 2019 and December 2024.

The Working Group is comprised of representatives from Yellowknives Dene First Nation, North Slave Métis Alliance, the Tłıchǫ Government, Environment and Climate Change Canada, the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resource Board, and the GNWT departments of Environment and Climate Change (ECC), Executive and Indigenous Affairs (EIA), and Industry, Tourism and Investment (ITI).

The Working Group worked together to come to an agreement on a management class map and the overall Range Plan. Each draft was distributed to members for comments; the final draft plan was also sent for comments and feedback before it was submitted for final approval. When the *Have your say* website opened for public engagement in April 2026, the Working Group was invited to submit comments.

The External Advisory Group was regularly engaged between 2021 and November 2025 to keep them updated on the progress of the Range Plan. Representatives of the External Advisory Group include NWT/NU Chamber of Mines, Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, NWT Wildlife Federation, Parks Canada Agency, NWT Wildlife Federation, Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board, Mackenzie Valley Land and Water Board, Digaa Enterprises, Aurora Wood Pellets, and Government of British Columbia. All the representatives of the External Advisory Group were invited to submit comments on the range plan at the meetings, as well as during the public engagement period.

Additionally, eight meetings were held between September 2019 and September 2025 with the GNWT Internal Planning Outcome Review Group to discuss and document feedback on the Range Plan. This group consists of representatives from more GNWT departments than those on the Working Group. The Internal Planning Outcome Review Group included Infrastructure, ITI, MACA, EIA, Justice, and ECC (including Forest Management).

Through the *Have your say* website, GNWT invited residents, Indigenous Governments, Indigenous organizations, community governments, businesses, industry, and non-governmental organizations to share their views on the Range Plan for Boreal Caribou in the Northwest Territories: Wek'èezhì Region between March 25 and April 17, 2026. Letters were also sent to Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, community governments and non-governmental organizations for their feedback.

A news release and social media advertising were used to promote awareness of the *Have Your Say* public engagement. Participants were asked nineteen questions and given the opportunity to submit additional comments. No demographic information was collected to protect participants' anonymity. A total of six members of the public responded.

Have Your Say Findings:

The responses are presented by topic, based on the questions in the *Have your say* survey. Some topics have been grouped together to avoid repetition. The responses to the questions are then discussed.

Purpose of range plan and connection to boreal caribou recovery:

There were mixed opinions regarding the document's clarity and purpose. One respondent understood the focus of the document was to minimize impacts to caribou through mitigation strategies. Other respondents indicated that the tiered system that includes percentages, management classes, and intensity classifications is confusing and needs to be simplified. One respondent pointed out that the

range plan was a bit jargon-heavy and suggested a plain language summary should accompany the range plan.

Cooperation, collaboration and transparency:

Some respondents believed the plan had been well prepared, grounded in the principles of cooperation, collaboration and transparency among co-management partners; however, they noted that it lacked transparency because the document is fairly technical and scientific. Some respondents suggested that adaptive management could be explained more clearly, since some actions were being deferred to a later date on that basis, even though the date is not actually specified. Respondents also asked whether there was sufficient monitoring of caribou to inform decisions.

Use of Traditional Knowledge, science and local insights:

Some respondents said the document contained a wealth of high-quality science and traditional knowledge, while others disagreed with some of the scientific decisions presented, including buffer zones for roads and fire management regimes. One respondent noted that climate change will continue to have significant impacts on fires; therefore, it should be given more consideration in the document.

Actions taken to promote conservation and recovery of boreal caribou:

Respondents acknowledged that some management actions are included in the plan; but some felt that land and water boards should be provided with more information to ensure they have the tools and support to include range planning in their research and regulatory measures. This includes the *Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act* (MVRMA). All NWT projects undergo preliminary screening under MVRMA. Some guidance as to how range planning could be considered during the screening of regulatory applications and review would be very helpful.

Respondents expressed concern that the 60% boreal caribou survival rate is being used as the basis for managing this species' habitat. The range plans emerge from the Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) Boreal Caribou Recovery Strategy which indicates that boreal caribou require at least 65% undisturbed habitat to have a 60% survival rate. Some respondents expressed concern that this was not an adequate survival rate, being compared to "little more than a coin toss". Given harvest and predation pressures, combined with other threats such as climate change and disease, it was recommended that the 60% survival rate be examined, and a higher survival rate be considered for long-term survival of caribou.

Respondents suggested that ongoing monitoring data should be shared, including location and population abundance. Stating that understanding the location of the boreal caribou population is helpful, particularly given that habitat disturbance is likely to increase.

Some respondents said the plan addresses caribou's biological needs while also providing clear zones for responsible development: "a good balance of the environment and economic development". One respondent suggested that the plan should consider end-of-project restoration. This often occurs when a company is sold off, and the responsibility then falls on the people and government to fix what was originally industry's responsibility. Establishing a mandatory fund to address disturbance if a company goes out of business was suggested as a potential solution.

Thresholds and disturbance limits:

There was some concern over waiting until disturbance limits are exceeded before taking action. How would managers proceed at that point? It was therefore suggested to have a plan in place before the disturbance threshold is reached. This would include allocating disturbance percentage(s) to industry/human needs, such as roads or national security infrastructure. Managers should try to avoid allowing “exceptional circumstances” or the need for infrastructure to circumvent this plan.

Another suggestion focused on managing/decreasing existing disturbance. The respondent suggested having a tangible plan that includes timelines, specified penalties and legal tools to enforce it. Funds should also be available to support work to reduce disturbance. Offsetting or making in-kind financial contributions as a “payment” for disturbance should be avoided, as it can lead to a “cost of doing business” mindset. Rather, proponents should seriously consider the timing and location of the disturbance. Offsetting is a tricky solution, and there is currently very little, if any, happening in NWT. If offsetting is pursued, as one reader pointed out, we do not have strong restoration capabilities; therefore, a high replacement ratio, such as 1:15 or 1:100, should be considered.

Land use activities:

With respect to alternative land use, respondents suggested that some land uses that should be considered in the range plan include: wood cutting, and renewable energy developments such as wind turbines and solar panels etc. The range plan should also reflect increased access to buffer zones on roads by harvesters, campers, wood cutters etc. This increased access will most certainly increase the Zone of Influence in these areas.

Proposals for land-use activities

Some survey participants felt that more details should be provided to land and water boards so they have the tools and resources to incorporate Range Plan considerations into their research and regulatory measures. Others felt that the range plan was helpful in making final decisions on proposals for land-use activities, adding that it would be helpful to include contact information for the range plan. A suggestion was also made to require that project proposals and approvals have firm timelines.

Triggers for 5-year plan review:

Respondents encouraged those implementing the range plan to apply the precautionary principle, particularly since the area being managed is a sensitive ecological system. They also referred to the range plan being “triggered” if there is a steep decline in the boreal caribou population. It was suggested that “steep” be defined. A “steep” decline is reactive and does not inspire confidence that the plan can make a difference.

Next Steps:

The feedback from the public engagement will inform the continued development of the Range Plan for Boreal Caribou in the Northwest Territories: Wek'èezhì Region. This Range Plan requires final approval by the GNWT and the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board. Once the pending approvals are in place, the Range Plan will be posted on the GNWT website and circulated to co-management partners.