



North

N.W.T. government reps take 4 hours of questions at hearings on Sahtu's caribou herds

At times emotional hearing answered questions on local enforcement and hunting quotas

[John Last](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jan 23, 2020 12:30 PM CT | Last Updated: January 24



On Wednesday, the second day of hearings in Colville Lake, N.W.T., staff from the territory's Department of Environment took questions from community members for four hours. (John Last/CBC)

The second day of hearings on how to manage the hunting of caribou in the N.W.T.'s Sahtu region saw an exhaustive four hour questions and answer session with representatives from the territory's Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

The department is responsible for enforcing quotas on the caribou harvest determined by regional management boards. It's just one participant in the hearings, hosted by Colville Lake and organized by the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board.

Heather Sayine-Crawford, the manager of wildlife research and monitoring for Environment and Natural Resources, and Brett Elkin, director of wildlife, answered questions from Indigenous leadership for four hours following a short presentation. Two wildlife biologists were also present.

Sayine-Crawford and Elkin frequently consulted a lawyer in answering questions on local enforcement, harvest regulations, and the protected status of many caribou herds.

“A lot of people are going to be hungry now, because we can't give them any meat.”

- Wilbert Kochon, Colville Lake chief

Caribou is a staple food source in the region, but several herds have seen a steep decline in size. A number are considered to be species at risk, though some delegates questioned whether the herds can be treated as distinct

The group took more than two minutes to confer before responding to the first question.



David Codzi, president of Colville Lake's land corporation, waits for an answer while representatives from Environment and Natural Resources conferred with a lawyer for more than two minutes. (John Last/CBC)

David Codzi, president of the Ayoni Keh Land Corporation, asked why Deline's local harvest management plan, approved in a similar hearing in 2016, has still not been recognized in law.

"We're continuing to consider this issue," Sayine-Crawford eventually answered, echoing language in written submissions sent weeks earlier.

'That kind of hurts me,' says chief

Colville Lake Chief Wilbert Kochon followed, contesting the department's low count of caribou, which allows it to implement a limit on the caribou harvests under terms set out in the Sahtu land claim.

"A lot of people are going to be hungry now, because we can't give them any meat," he said. "That kind of hurts me."

"It's our livelihood. For you it's just a job. It's a big difference."



Sayine-Crawford and Elkin consult off mic before answering a question from a delegate. (John Last/CBC)

That elicited a more personal reply from Sayine-Crawford.

"The importance of caribou to people in the N.W.T., to people in the Sahtu, is not lost on me," she said.

Sayine-Crawford, herself Dene, said she was not "as immersed" in her culture as others who spoke, and was still "re-learning."

But she stood by the department's assessments of the herds.

"I know we get questions sometimes. But I stand by them," she said. "I couldn't stand here and tell you all this without standing behind those numbers."

Not 'just a job': wildlife biologist

Toward the end, the panel's voices were breaking as they explained the personal significance of their work.

"It's difficult to hear someone say it's just a job," said wildlife biologist Jan Adamczewski, recalling Kochon's comment.



N.W.T. government renewable resources Officer Jules Fournel holds the blue metal tags used for barren-ground caribou. According to local wildlife officials, most Indigenous hunters don't use the tags. (John Last/CBC)

"When we get [caribou survey] numbers back and they're not good ... you feel it here," he said, gesturing to his heart.

The Environment Department's caribou tags have been rejected once before, at a similar meeting in 2016. Some communities have sent back the tags issued to them ever since.

- [**Sahtú gathers in Colville Lake to develop new plan for caribou harvest**](#)
- [**Colville Lake makes pitch for local control on 1st day of Sahtu caribou hearings**](#)

That resulted in some confusion at the hearing over whether untagged hunting is illegal in the Sahtu.

Local officers said few Indigenous hunters use the metal tags issued by the department anymore.

At the hearing, the government panel acknowledged an interim agreement means the permission of the local band is generally enough.

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