

**Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group  
2022 Meeting Summary**

**December 14-15, 2022**

Downtown Marriott Hotel, 820 W. 7<sup>th</sup> Ave, Anchorage

**APPROVED** by WACH Working Group at December 2023 meeting.

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd (WACH) Working Group (WG) met in person on December 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (see agenda at the end of this document). The following is a summary of meeting presentations and Working Group members’ discussion. Motions passed at the meeting and Assignments for follow-up actions are listed on pages 16-18. The Working Group “Binder” that includes all written materials referred to at the meeting is posted at [www.westernarcticcaribou.net](http://www.westernarcticcaribou.net)

**I. Call to Order** – WG Chair Vern Cleveland called the teleconference to order at 8:30 a.m.

**A. WACH WG Roll Call / Establish Quorum** – Quorum was met with 16 of 20 WG members present at 8:30 am on Day 1. 17 of 20 members were present on Day 2. The following table lists WG membership attendance at this meeting.

<b>Working Group Seat</b>	<b>Working Group Member</b>
1. Anchorage Advisory Committee .....	Neil DeWitt
2. Buckland, Deering, Selawik .....	Vida Coaltrain
3. Anaktuvuk Pass, Nuiqsut.....	Eli Nukapigak
4. Elim, Golovin, White Mountain.....	Morris Nakaruk (alternate)
5. Fairbanks Hunters .....	David Kilbourn
6. Hunting Guides.....	Jake Jacobson
7. Kivalina, Noatak .....	Enoch Mitchell
8. Kotzebue .....	Cyrus Harris (Vice Chair)
9. Koyukuk River.....	Pollock Simon
10. Lower Kobuk River .....	Vern Cleveland, Sr. (Chair)
11. Middle Yukon River .....	Michael Stickman (not present)
12. Point Hope and Point Lay.....	Steve Oomittuk (not present)
13. Nome.....	Charlie Lean
14. Conservationists.....	Tim Fullman
15. Northern Seward Peninsula .....	Johnson Eningowuk (alternate)
16. Reindeer Herders Association.....	Tom Gray
17. Southern Seward Peninsula .....	Morris Nassuk
18. Transporters.....	Brian Alberts (alternate)
19. Upper Kobuk River .....	Bill Bernhardt (present day 2)
20. Atqasuk, Utqiagvik, Wainwright .....	Wanda Kippi (not present)

**MOTION** by Tim Fullman, second by Neil DeWitt, to approve the following alternate members to the WACH Working Group – Seat 8 alternate Thomas Baker; Seat 15 alternate Johnson Eningowuk; Motion PASSED unanimously on a voice vote. (NOTE: The Working Group is still seeking an alternate member for Seat 20.)

**B. Audience Attendance:** Public and agency attendance was not taken. However, 30+ people were present in the audience, including agency staff that presented information to the Working Group.

- C. **Approve Agenda:** Facilitator Holly Spoth-Torres reviewed the agenda (Attachment 1). MOTION by Neil DeWitt, second by Morris Nassuk, to approve the meeting agenda. Motion PASSED unanimously on a voice vote.

## II. Western Arctic Caribou Herd Status & Management Level

**Western Arctic Caribou Herd Overview and 2021 Census** – Alex Hansen, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) Division of Wildlife Conservation, presented information about the WACH population status and trends (see p. 13 in 2021 WG Binder). The presentation laid the foundation for the WG’s later recommendations regarding future management of the caribou herd (see p. 6 below). Key points in the ADFG presentation included:

- **Herd population declining** – The July 2022 photo census estimated 164,000 caribou in the Western Arctic Caribou Herd which is down from 188,000 in 2021. Census numbers for past years: 2020 – no census; 2019 – 244,000; 2018 – no census; 2017 – 259,000; 2016 – 201,000. In the two years between the 2019 and 2021 census, the herd declined nearly 12% per year.
- **Calving (parturition) is below average** – Summer surveys show that 64% of collared cows had calves in 2022, compared with 68% in 2021, 67% in 2020, 81% in 2019, 86% in 2018, and 83% in 2017. The long-term average calving rate is 70% (1992-2022). Parturition is down farther than we’ve seen in the past but is not super concerning.
- **Yearling recruitment is average** – Yearling recruitment in 2022 was 17:100 yearlings:adults, which is the same as in 2021 and matches the 25-year average (1998-2022).
- **Adult cow survival is below average** – Cow survival rate for 2021 was 71%, which is below the long-term average of 81% (1987-2020). Adult cow survival is the primary concern related to the recent population decline. The herd won’t see growth unless survival is above 80%.
- **Fall herd composition** – The bull:cow ratio in fall 2021 was 47 bulls:100 cows. ADFG doesn’t complete this survey every year. The last survey was in 2021. The goal is to maintain 30 bulls:100 cows. There are no major concerns currently.
- **Cause of mortality** – Primary causes of mortality are predation, “unknown”, and hunting.
- **Population trend** – Since 2005, the herd has had more years of decline than increase or stability, with cow mortality higher and calf recruitment lower.
- **Management level per WACH Cooperative Management Plan** – Each year, the Working Group considers what management level should be assigned to the Western Arctic herd, based on Table 1 of the WACH Cooperative Management Plan (updated 2019). At its meeting on December 13, 2022, the WACH Technical Committee recommended that the Working Group assign the same management level as 2021, the management level “Preservative, Declining”, based on the herd size (within the range of 130,000-200,000) and adult cow survival rate less than 80%. The Preservative, Declining Management Level recommends a harvest of somewhere between 6000 and 10,000 caribou. At this “Preservative” management level, the Cooperative Management Plan indicates that the following management recommendations should be considered (see Table 2 in the 2019 Management Plan):
  - No harvest of calves
  - Limit harvest of cows by residents through permit hunts and/or village quotas
  - Limit subsistence harvest of bulls only if <30 bulls:100 cows (NOTE: that is not the case in 2021, when bull:cow ratio was 47:100)
  - Restrict harvest to residents only, according to State and federal law. Closure of some federal public lands may be necessary.

(NOTE – Later in the meeting, the Working Group passed a motion designating the Western Arctic herd as “Preservative, Declining” in 2022. See page 6, below.)

- Recommended Harvest – The recommended harvest rate is 4.8%. 4.8% of 164,000 equals 7,872 caribou, keeping the harvest composition at 70% (5511) bulls and (2361) 30% cows.
- The C&T finding is positive, indicating that this herd is a subsistence priority. The ANS is 8,000 - 12,000.
- With the current population numbers decreasing, excessive harvest, especially of cows, can be very serious. For ADFG to understand the implications of harvest, we need to understand more accurately what the harvest is, so it is critical that we get better harvest data. The data gap between the estimated and reported harvest is very large. ADFG only captures data of about 10% of the harvest.
- Cow harvest should be our highest priority and we should discuss ways to reduce the cow harvest. However, we can't do this without also thinking about the bull harvest so that the ration remains healthy.

Working Group members' questions and discussion on herd status included:

- Q: Is it possible to control predators to improve the herd size?  
A: When ADFG goes to the board of game, considering we are now in a place of intensive management, the Board of Game may require habitat improvements, predator control, or other options. However, predator control actions are probably not an option on most federal lands.
- Q: In the past when the numbers declined so much, what management actions were taken to help increase the numbers of the herd?  
A: We need to dig into history a bit more, but local communities were restricted to bull harvest only – with a total of 3000 permits being issued in 1977.
- Comment – Aircraft may be impacting the herd migration.
- Comment – Limiting non-federally qualified hunters didn't have any impact on the herd numbers.
- Q: Do you have data about non-resident hunting?  
A: Yes, we have great harvest data about non-resident hunting from the transporters. Typically, the non-resident take was about 350 animals, almost exclusively bulls. This year, not all transporters were in operation. We are still waiting for the numbers to come back but I estimate the take to be 100 animals or less. The non-resident, non-local harvest is reduced and biologically the numbers are a 'drop in the bucket'. There are social implications and conflict between user groups, but that component of the harvest is biologically insignificant. If there is an impact to be made we need to consider limiting local harvest.
- Comment – Once we get to population numbers like this, we really need to be thinking about strategies to help the population. We don't want to see numbers in the early 1970s (75,000). Those were difficult days. Many of us didn't get any caribou this fall.
- Comment – The Kotzebue Advisory Commission decided to submit a proposal to the Board of Game because they thought that 5 caribou per day was too many considering the current census. Their proposal recommends a bag limit of 4 caribou annually, with only one allowed to be a cow.
- Comment – Please consider separating the Western Arctic Herd and the Teshekpuk herd when considering ANS.
- Comment – Predators are a large part of the mortality rate. Predator control could be effective – please consider this.
- Comment – Some communities see a lot of caribou in certain years when other communities don't see any caribou. It is so hard to predict. Comment Response – This is true, it is important to educate the entire region about the migration patterns so that everyone understands that this is a resource for everyone, the communities that see hundreds of caribou in a year as well as the communities that see zero. We all need to collectively work together to manage the herd sustainably for the future and future generations.

- Comment – Consider developing a citizen reporting system, cooperating with communities and villages to improve harvest data reporting.

**National Park Service Caribou Monitoring** – Kyle Joly, NPS, presented information on the movements of caribou the NPS has collared (see p. 24 in WG Binder). Points from the presentation:

- Fall 2022 migration routes & movements:
  - Only 20% of the herd migrated south of the Brooks Range, 80% stayed north of the range.
  - The herd stayed very far east, so villages like Noatak and Kivalina were not close to the herd at all. Most were on the North Slope; a few animals were in the upper Noatak.
  - There are no obvious barriers to movement.
- New Information about 2021 Migration: 10 caribou interacted with the Red Dog Mine Road and an evacuation road out of Kivalina. 2 animals eventually crossed the Red Dog Road even though it took them a while. Both survived the winter. Of the 8 that didn't cross the road, only 5 survived. 62.5% died. This is a very small sample size, but this could be important.
- WAH Collar Results – 33 GPS collars were deployed all on females. All netting occurred in April 2022.
- Migration distance – The mean distance of travel by collared caribou from September 2021 - August 2022 was 1,888 miles, which is higher than the previous year and slightly above average.
- Fall Migration, Noatak River Crossing – The distribution of the herd crossing the Noatak was almost identical in 2021 as 2020, with 57% crossing in the upper Noatak almost to the Gates of the Arctic boundary. When compared against the average distribution of the herd crossing the Noatak over time, in 2020 and 2021 only 1% of the herd crossed the very lower Noatak while between 2010 and 2016 an average of 13% crossed the lower Noatak.
- Fall migration, Kobuk River Crossing – From 2010-2015 over 80% of the collared caribou crossed the Kobuk River to winter farther south. From 2016-2020, only an average 34% crossed the Kobuk River, with a record low of just 6% of the herd crossing in 2020. In the fall of 2021, 73% of the herd crossed the Kobuk River. However, this is still lower than the long-term average of over 80%. Note that only a few animals traveled farther south to cross the next river, the Selawik River. Most animals didn't go much farther south than crossing the Kobuk River. Places like Shaktoolik and the Seward Peninsula, didn't see WAH caribou. The average date of Kobuk River crossing has gotten much later. Since 2010, the date of the first animal crossing the Kobuk has shifted by two months – from late August until early November. The average date of crossing for 2020 was November 2. The average date of crossing for 2021 was October 16. This creates a situation where hunters who would rather take the big bulls do not want them because they are in rut at that time – and this can increase hunting pressure on cows.
- Overwintering – There has been a dramatic change in recent years in where Western Arctic Herd caribou are wintering, in terms of NPS conservation units in the herd's range. For the last four winters, no caribou have wintered in the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve – while 6-7 years ago 75% of the collared animals wintered there. Another radical change is that 42% of the collars overwintered in the Kobuk Valley NP. In the first 8 years the NPS had GPS collars on caribou there wasn't a single collared animal who overwintered in Kobuk Valley NP.
- Spring migration – The route and timing of spring migration doesn't show as much variation over the years, as cows are motivated to get to the calving grounds and timing of calving has not been changing much. In 2022 the herd was crossing the Selawik River on May 4.
- Land Cover Map – There's a new product available that maps land cover from 1985 to 2020 and shows changes in lichen cover from the same time period. We are going to take a look at this and try to analyze the abundance of lichen, critical for caribou habitat, and see if we can make any determinations.
- Recent research papers of interest –

- Caribou Migrations in a Changing Arctic –
  - Snow and cold temperatures were linked to fall migratory movements.
  - Quantified traditional observations of caribou hunters.
  - Snow and cold temperatures are coming later due to climate change.
  - Reviewed factors influencing caribou migrations and how climate change will impact them.
  - Weather conditions, population size, development, disturbance, habitat, forage conditions, wildfire and other factors can impact migrations.
  - <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/boumigrationchanges.htm>
- What Goes up Must Come Down: The Influence of Climate on Caribou Populations – Large, northern caribou populations, like the WAH, tend to oscillate and this appears to be linked to large-scale weather patterns. <https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frym.2021.631372>

Working Group members' questions and discussion on the NPS presentation included:

- Q: I am not seeing a lot of activity around Selawik? Do we know why the caribou aren't coming to Selawik?  
A: Fidelity is what we refer to as caribou using the same route every year. We see very low fidelity especially in the fall. Caribou have a high fidelity to the calving grounds and the insect relief areas. The last few years there have been less animals migrating in general and their routes for the fall and winter are unknown and they just haven't been going through Selawik recently. Sometimes their routes are due to the availability of lichen, sometimes other factors influence their migration like climate or other disturbances.
- Q: Can caribou get Covid?  
A: It is possible for Covid to be transmitted but I don't think there's been a documented case. There have been documented cases in deer and other species. We do our best to mitigate transmission; if we aren't healthy, we don't go out into the field.
- Q: Are there any diseases observed in the herd?  
A: ADFG does a number of studies on the health of individual animals and the herd in general. The Western Arctic Herd is a healthy herd. Caribou can get diseases and they do occur, but it's generally a very low prevalence.
- Q: It seems like oscillations and natural weather patterns are cyclic. Do you think the herd will decrease and then eventually increase again based on these natural weather patterns?  
A: That has happened in the past and it the herd numbers could oscillate again along with the natural weather patterns, however there is evidence that climate change is disrupting the natural cycles and the oscillating patterns are becoming less regular. The pattern in the arctic is a 50-year cycle, a much longer cycle than El Nino, a 3-5-year cycle.
- Q: Has human presence at Onion Portage prevented caribou from returning there?  
A: Onion Portage is one the most famous archeological sites in the state, and people have documented human use of caribou at that spot 13,000 years. After 13,000 years caribou were still coming through, so that doesn't seem to be an issue.
- Q: Are reindeer factored into the caribou census?  
A: There aren't that many reindeer left, maybe less than 5000, and no one should be hunting them, because they are considered private property. These are primarily on the Seward Peninsula and very far away from where the censuses are conducted. There is a little bit of genetic mixing of reindeer and caribou, but not very much.

**Working Group Decision on Herd Management Level** – The Working Group discussed the recommendation from the Technical Committee that the WACH be within the “Preservative” and

“Declining” management category, with regard to Table 1 of the WACH Cooperative Management Plan (p. 21 of the 2019 plan). When discussing potential management actions, the Technical Committee recommends reducing the harvest of cows.

Working Group members expressed the following comments in discussion of the herd Management Level:

- We need to take some action now, to be able to preserve our harvest in the future.
- The Technical Committee wants to stress that real herd conservation will occur if we limit the harvest of female caribou.
- Agree that Preservative, Declining is the right management category, but the management actions we recommend as a result of this decision are where the important conversations need to occur.

MOTION by Neil DeWitt, second by Charlie Lean, to set the Management Level for the Western Arctic Herd at “Preservative, Declining” per the 2019 WACH Cooperative Management Plan, Table 1. Motion PASSED on a roll call vote. Votes - Yes: 14; Abstain: 1

Working Group discussion turned to what the “Preservative, Declining” Management Level may mean in terms of management of the Western Arctic Herd. Will Wiese, USFWS Acting Refuge Manager for the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge, noted that the 2019 WACH Cooperative Management Plan (Table 2) lists four management recommendations that can be considered when the herd is “Preservative, Declining”. These are:

- No harvest of calves
- Limit harvest of cows by residents through permit hunts and/or village quotas
- Limit subsistence harvest of bulls only if <30 bulls:100 cows (NOTE: that is not the case in 2021, when bull:cow ratio is 47:100)
- Restrict harvest to residents only, according to State and federal law. Closure of some federal public lands may be necessary.

Working Group members asked the following questions and expressed the following (varied) viewpoints and ideas during the discussion of what actions to take to address the “Preservative, Declining” Management Level:

- Q: What are the current harvest numbers?  
A: We don’t know.
- Comment: It is difficult for us to make recommendations if we don’t know the true harvest numbers. We need to get better harvest numbers.
- Comment: If the long-term average annual harvest is 12,000 per year, and the Preservative, Declining Management Level recommends a harvest of 6,000 – 10,000 animals per year, we are already over by 2,000. We need to find ways to reduce harvest.
- Comment: We need to figure out how many caribou each family needs.
- Comment: We should focus on reducing the cow harvest.
- Comment: We should not allow any harvest of cows until the numbers start to increase again.
- Five caribou per day is too many when the herd is in a declining state. The Kotzebue AC took a very bold step, knowing the herd was declining, and proposed a bag limit of four caribou per year, one of which can be a cow. The one cow is included in case of hunter error. This is intended to be a temporary change so that when the numbers increase again, the bag limit can also increase.
- Comment: In the lower Kobuk there was a discussion about limiting to three per day, no cows.

- Q: If we limit cow harvest, what does that do to the population of the herd?  
A: There is a limit to the number of bulls we can shoot before it starts impacting the herd. The current numbers show that the herd can support an annual harvest of up to 8,000 bulls.
- A proposal like the Kotzebue AC makes a lot of sense, however we need to keep in mind that the timeline for proposals to be made, accepted, approved, and implemented is long. In the interim we can focus on education.
- It is important to minimize access to caribou, not criminalize.
- In addition to addressing the cows we also need to figure out why the calf survival rate is down.
- The North Slope Borough may not be as supportive of these restrictions as others.
- Q: Are there any members of the Federal Subsistence Board in attendance?  
A: No.
- Q: Does the draft Kotzebue AC proposal consider those that can't hunt, i.e., Elders, sick, etc?  
A: Yes, if a person is qualified a proxy can hunt for them under the state regs and if under the federal regulations, you can designate a hunter to hunt for you.

MOTION by Vern Cleveland, second by Tom Gray, to make a proposal to both the Board of Game and the Federal Subsistence Board to change regulations from a bag limit of five caribou per hunter per day, to a total of four caribou per hunter per year, only one of which may be a cow. The proposal includes all management units that contain the Western Arctic Herd including 21B, 22, 23, 26A, 24B, 24C, and 24D. Motion passes unanimously on a roll call vote. Votes - Yes: 16

**Assignment:** Holly Spoth-Torres will draft proposals to the Alaska Board of Game and Federal Subsistence Board, for the Chair's signature, recommending new regulations.

After a break, the Working Group discussion turned to additional management actions identified in the 2019 WACH Cooperative Management Plan (Table 2) and what other proposals the working group may wish to take.

MOTION by Charlie Lean, second by Tom Gray. RESOLUTION: The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group believes that the ANS threshold has been crossed and urges the State to enact existing regulations in place, now that the ANS threshold has been passed. Motion passes on a roll call vote. Votes - Yes: 12; No: 4

**Assignment:** Holly Spoth-Torres will send this resolution to the Alaska Board of Game for their consideration.

Working Group members expressed the following (varied) viewpoints in discussion of the motion to eliminate non-Alaska resident caribou hunting of the Western Arctic Herd:

- Comment: Guided hunting is important to the Alaska economy, but we need to focus on subsistence first.
- Comment: Currently WSA 2101 limits non-federally qualified hunters from hunting on some federal land. This is temporary and will be in effect through the fall of 2023. A proposal is needed if you want to propose restricting non-Alaska-resident hunting of caribou on state lands.
- Comment: Biologically, eliminating non-Alaska-resident hunting may not make a big difference, but socially, this act could make a really big difference. If we are asking Alaskans to make a big sacrifice, limiting the annual bag limit down to four animals per year, it also makes sense that we would also ask non-residents to also make a sacrifice.
- Comment: Transporters are opposed to this action. There are likely other actions that would have a bigger, more meaningful impact.

- Q: Does the count for the Western Arctic Herd include animals for the Teshekpuk Herd?  
A: No. When we completed the counts, the herds were separate.

### **III. 2023 North American Caribou Workshop**

Kyle Joly, NPS, provided information the 2023 North American Caribou Workshop & Arctic Ungulate Conference, an international conference coming to Anchorage's Captain Cook Hotel on May 8 – 12, 2023. This is the first time the two conferences have been held simultaneously. This is the largest gathering of caribou and ungulate (muskox, moose, reindeer, Dall sheep, etc.) scientists in the world. The theme is "Crossing Boundaries". There is funding for one Working Group member to attend. Please identify a Working Group member to attend plus an alternate. For more information visit: [www.nacw-auc-2023.org](http://www.nacw-auc-2023.org)

MOTION by Neil DeWitt, second by Tom Gray. The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group agrees to send Cyrus Harris to the conference with Vern Cleveland as the alternate. Motion passes unanimously on a voice vote.

### **IV. Resource Development in the Herd's Range**

Tim Fullman, Chair of the Working Group's Resource Development Committee, gave an update on resource development projects within the range of the herd (p. 69 in WG Binder).

#### Ambler Road and Mining District (p. 70 in WG Binder)

- In 2020 the BLM approved permitting of an Ambler access road.
- Two lawsuits were filed requiring the BLM to complete a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement.
- There will be new opportunities to weigh in.
- Scoping for the SEIS took place in September through early November of 2022 and the Working Group submitted comments (see p. 71 of the WG binder) via a letter that was approved by the executive committee. This letter reiterated previous comments but also expressed concern about recent decreases in the herd numbers.
- The WG also submitted comments (as voted on in December of 2021) to Ambler Metals asking them to increase the distance at which they shut down operations at their Bornite Exploration camp when there are five or more caribou within five miles of the operation (see p. 77 of WG binder). No response was received from Ambler Metals.
- In February, 2022, the Working Group also sent comments to DNR asking they not grant the private exclusive easement requested by AIDEA for the Ambler Road (see letter on p. 80).

#### Other Ambler Development (p. 82 in WG Binder)

- Other claims have been filed by South32 and Trilogy Metals along the proposed Ambler Road route.
- Air and on-the-ground exploration activities have already started.
- We raised these concerns as cumulative impacts of the road on caribou when we submitted scoping comments to the BLM on the SEIS.

#### Anarraaq – Aktigirug Mining Exploration (p. 83 in WG Binder)

- Teck American, Inc, proposed an exploration project to evaluate potential for new mineral deposits northeast of the Red Dog Mine. This would lead to construction of approximately eight miles of roads. The application with the Army Corps of Engineers was closed due to insufficient information.

However, in the spring of 2022 Teck reopened the application, provided new information that was requested, and is proposing to move forward with this exploration project. The Army Corps of Engineers reached out to us again for comments since we commented previously. We again provided comments in April of 2022 (p. 84 in WG Binder). We received a response to these comments (p. 86 in WG binder).

OTZ Microwave Tower Broadband Project (p. 88 in WG Binder)

- OTZ Telephone Cooperative has proposed to build a series of microwave antennae tower communications sites to provide broadband internet between the Northwest Arctic Borough and the Dalton Highway. The proposal includes up to 33 towers. OTZ is proposing construction in 2023.
- Improving internet connectivity is very important, however we want to make sure the project minimizes impacts to caribou.
- BLM may be preparing an Environmental Assessment and we will be tracking this.

Willow Master Development Plan (p. 89 in WG Binder)

- This project would expand infrastructure in the northeastern part of the National Petroleum Reserve, Alaska, or the NPR-A. Oil and gas development would move further westward and move up further north to the edge of the Teshekpuk Lake special area, which protects critical calving, post calving and insect relief habitat for the Teshekpuk caribou herd. This project was initially approved back in 2020, but like Ambler, there was a legal ruling that halted that development and led to a supplemental environmental impact statement analysis.
- The Willow Project is not one that the Working Group has commented on in the past because it primarily would impact the Teshekpuk Herd, not the Western Arctic Herd, but since the two herds tend to be managed similarly, and given some of the recent patterns of winter use by the Western Herd where many animals have stayed up on the North Slope, this is a project we should track.

Peregrine Exploration Program (p. 90 in WG Binder)

- The Peregrine Project is a five-year oil and gas exploration effort by 88 Energy in the eastern NPR-A southwest of Nuiqsut and north of Umiat. development and BLM is likely to revise their approval to address issues raised by the court. It is expected that there will be opportunities to comment on the project in spring 2022.
- Equipment has been moved into the area coming south on a snow road that extends off the North Slope Borough community Winter Access Trail. In the past two years, they've drilled multiple wells to do exploration, but recently they announced they're unlikely to do any exploration activity this winter season.
- We have not commented because the range is outside the Western Arctic Herd area.

Noatak – Red Dog Road - Planning and Environmental Linkage (p. 91 in WG Binder)

- In 2019, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) announced it is partnering with the Northwest Arctic Borough and Native Village of Noatak to look into building a permanent gravel road connecting Noatak to the Delong Mountain Transportation System (DMTS, i.e., the Red Dog road). In 2020, the Working Group submitted a letter to DOT&PF relevant to minimizing impacts to the Western Arctic and Teshekpuk caribou herds. The state's planning process is ongoing and there is not currently an opportunity for comments.

The following comments and questions were raised in Working Group discussion of the Resource Development Committee report:

- Q: Are the OTZ towers being placed on the highest spots possible? Caribou also go to the high spots.  
A: Generally, towers are placed on high points. They are usually about 30 miles apart and need to be connected by line of sight.
- Q: Are the OTZ tower construction require road access?  
A: Materials will be flown in by helicopter.
- Comment: Broadband is very important for search and rescue in our area.
- Comment: People are very concerned about the impact of the Ambler Road through caribou migration routes and prime hunting and trapping areas. Although the road is proposed as a private road, people are very concerned that in the future it may be opened to the public allowing more access to hunting grounds.
- Q: Are they going to build the Noatak Road?  
A: The planning and environmental linkages phase is like pre-planning. There are route studies/analysis.
- Q: Are there requirements for dust control on the Red Dog Mine Road?  
A: The planning and environmental linkages phase is like pre-planning. There are route studies/analysis.
- Comment: Regarding the broadband it would be helpful to know what products/services will be available once the project is complete. Cell service? Internet? For whom and where?
- Comment: The impacts of roads on caribou are quite visible and this is well documented. The cause is unclear; it could be road dust, noise from trucks, hunting pressure. We are hopeful to have funding to study this in the future.
- Comment: The Noatak – Red Dog Road would help with fuel prices. It is rare that the barge makes it to Noatak anymore. Heating fuel and other fuel costs 10.99/gallon and all fuel is being flown in. Alternatives B, C and D are not favorable, but we will keep talking with the project team to find a good solution.
- Comment: I generally think broadband is a good thing, but I'm worried about all the noise that will impact the caribou herd.
- Comment: I'm concerned that continued road construction will impact the migration of the herd; but we need to cooperate with industry.
- Q: Have the impacts of the four alternatives identified in the Noatak – Red Dog Road on caribou been studied?  
A: The impacts of the Red Dog Road on caribou have been studied and published, however the four alternatives for connecting Noatak with the Red Dog Road have not been studied.
- Q: With all the road development occurring and being planned, are the impacts to caribou being monitored?  
A: The State of AK is doing some monitoring caribou monitoring (i.e. caribou stress tests) to analyze impacts to caribou.
- Q: I'm concerned about protecting the calving area? Is there anything we can do to help preserve the calving area from future expanded oil and gas development?  
A: If the Working Group wants, we can submit comments to the Department of the Interior asking for more permanent protection of the calving grounds and increase the protected area in the north. We could pass a resolution to do this.

## **V. Ambler Road Project**

Wendy Huber, Ambler Road Project Manager/BLM Planning and Environmental Specialist and Bill Hedman, Assistant Field Manager for the Upper Yukon, presented information to the Working Group about the status of the Ambler Road project (p. 94 in WG Binder).

### Summary of EIS Decision

- The BLM action was to analyze a proposed Right of Way (ROW) grant that provides for:
  - Technically and economically practical and feasible year-round industrial surface transportation access in support of mining exploration and development; and
  - Construction, operation, and maintenance of facilities associated with that access.
  - If approved, the road would be for private industrial access only.
- The BLM must decide if a ROW will be granted and, if so, the terms and conditions that will be imposed.
- The EIS must also provide the necessary analysis under NEPA for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Coast Guard for their permitting actions.

### Key Milestones – Starting in 2020

- Programmatic agreement (PA) for Section 106 National Historic Preservation Act was finalized in April 2020.
  - BLM moves forward with implementing the PA with consulting parties and signatories as related to pre-construction activities.
- Joint Record of Decision (ROD) was signed in July 2020.
- NAEC et. al., lawsuit filed August 2020.
- TCC et. al., lawsuit filed October 2020.
- BLM issued ROW grant in January 2021.
- DOI filed motion for voluntary remand of decisions made in the Joint ROD – February 2022.
  - Motion cited perceived deficiencies in the ANILCA 810 analysis and perceived lack of consultation associated with development of the PA for the Section 106 process.
  - Motion requested to the agencies to allow for “reconsideration through the administrative process.” [read: Supplemental EIS].
- Deputy Secretary suspended AIDEA’s ROW grant – March 2022.
- Court granted motion for voluntary remand of decisions in the JROD – May 2022.

### Supplemental EIS Timeline

- Notice of Intent published September 2022, starting the 45-day public comment period.
- Public comment period ended November 2022.
- BLM will begin working on a draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in early 2023.
- Anticipate Summer 2023 for the release of draft Supplemental EIS for public comment period.
- There will be a 45-day public comment period after the release of the DSEIS.

### What is the SEIS?

- The Supplemental EIS will address procedural and legal deficiencies that were in the original project analysis related to subsistence impacts (pursuant to ANILCA Section 810 and to Tribal consultation that occurred pursuant to Section 106 process).
  - Section 106 - initiate a process to revise the PA for Section 106

- ANILCA 810 - subsistence impacts to fisheries and caribou habitat and impacts to water in the surrounding project area.
- The BLM will look at any additional issues identified in scoping.
  - Possible alternatives from scoping will also be considered.

#### Opportunities for the WACH Working Group

- Part of looking at issues is reviewing any possible data gaps.
- If the working group has any new information or data, the BLM is interested in acquiring it.
- The working group can help with communicating that robust participation is needed at subsistence hearings.
- Any ideas on possible:
  - Mitigations
  - Alternatives
  - Solutions

The following comments and questions were raised in Working Group discussion of the Ambler Road report:

- Comment: A 45-day comment period is generally not enough time for us to have meaningful participation and input. Please consider extending the public comment deadline.
- Q: Do you respond to the public comments received during the scoping process?  
A: We consult with other agencies as we develop the draft after the scoping period, but we generally don't respond to scoping comments. We do respond to comments during the DSEIS phase.
- Q: Who reviews the public comments? Are they reviewed in Tribal Consultation?  
A: We share all comments publicly. We will also complete an official consultation through the Section 106 process. We are currently reaching out to tribes to see who might want to engage as a consulting party.
- Q: Is the road going to be a one-lane road or a two-lane road?  
A: The current plan is phased, starting with a winter access road to begin construction, then to a one-lane road, and with the final build-out eventually being a two-lane road.
- Comment: I don't support a 2-lane road if the road is going to be a private road.
- Comment: A road out here will impact a subsistence way of life.
- Comment: If this road becomes public it will give greater access to resources like hunting and fishing grounds.
- Comment: I'm concerned about pollution if a road is constructed.
- Comment: I am very concerned about the caribou and subsistence economy if a road is built. If a road is built we would want a guarantee that the caribou will still migrate on their traditional routes.
- Comment: A proposed private road makes it easier for it to become public in the future. We need to protect our culture. A road connection brings access from more urban areas putting a subsistence lifestyle at risk.  
Response: AIDEA is requesting a private road and that is what we are primarily analyzing. However, we will be analyzing the possibility that a public road could be a future outcome.
- Q: If the road were to become public in the future, it is my understanding that before it does, another, separate EIS process need to happen? Is that true?  
A: Yes.
- Q: Will there be a fence along the road? Will there be caribou crossings? Will there be turnouts?  
A: AIDEA would be the one to tell you the details of the development plan.

- Q: Is there a traffic analysis?  
A: AIDEA's proposal includes a traffic demand analysis.
- Q: Will the new exploration proposals along the route be included in the analysis?  
A: BLM is aware of these new proposals and will be addressed in the SEIS.
- Q: Have the caribou been studied around the area of the proposed Ambler Road?  
A: The NPS has had GPS collars out since 2009. We have about a decade of GPS data and collar data since the 1970s. It will be important to study the potential impacts to the herd as the numbers increase and decrease temporally. The NPS has two studies out. One looks at habitat and the other looks at changes to subsistence in areas where roads have been constructed. Most of the caribou crossings in the area of the proposed route occur in the winter months. Kyle Joly can give a presentation next year and will share the papers.
- Q: Is the ROW really 450 feet wide? That is a significant footprint.  
A: A 400-foot-wide easement isn't that uncommon. The design footprint will be closer to 200 feet.
- Comment: The caribou movement near the Dalton Highway changed a little, but not that much. The Dalton Highway allowed more access for hunting, but caribou still migrate to villages. The Dalton highway has helped villages via access through the ice roads and industry. It helps both sides.
- Comment: There are pros and cons to the potential development of this road. We should all work together to make sure we all have opportunity and ensure our culture and resources are protected. We should make this the best we can for the most people.
- Comment: I was against the road, but then I got a job at Bornite and I realized that this road would create a lot of work and opportunities for us and our children. Maybe the cost of living will go down if the road is built.
- Q: How much weight do different comments get?  
A: All comments get the same amount of weight, whether they are public or a cooperating agency or an interested party as long as the comments are substantive in nature. The difference between a cooperating agency and the general public is that the agency will have responsibilities and may participate in alternatives development.
- Q: What are the details of the road design?  
A: AIDEA has not completed the design of the roadway yet.
- Q: What is the approved route of the road?  
A: Through the SEIS process the BLM is required to go back and analyze the alternatives again. However, if nothing changes, the route that is approved and permitted is Route A (see Yellow Route on p. 95 of WG binder).
- Q: I understand that the State and BLM are not considering a land swap, however has the State selected some of the BLM lands where the possible road right of way is located?  
A: Yes, the State has selected some of these lands, however, the land within the corridor lies within Public Land Order withdrawal 5150 which means that those lands will be retained as a federal withdrawal for the purpose of utility, transportation, and industrial routes. If PLO 5150 goes away, then yes, the State could get that land. However, that is just speculation right now.

## **VI. Community Harvest Assessment Program**

Helen Cold, ADFG Subsistence Division, presented to the Working Group explaining the community harvest surveys (caribou focus) that are being conducted in eight communities within the range of the Western Arctic herd (p. 96 in the WG Binder).

- The communities included in the surveys: Golovin, Selawik, Shungnak, White Mountain, Shishmaref, Noatak, Deering and Kobuk.

- The project study updates for 2021-2022 include the Golovin, Selawik, Shungnak, and White Mountain communities. Deering, Noatak, Shishmaref, and Kobuk are pending community review.
- There are 2018-2019 estimates of caribou harvest by Golovin, Selawik, Shungnak and White Mountain (total harvest and pounds per capita); harvest timing; and harvest areas.
- Methods include household surveys, ethnographic interviews with mapping, and participant observation.
- Funding Agency: US Fish and Wildlife Service
  - Research partnership among 8 study communities, ADF&G Subsistence, ADF&G Department of Wildlife Conservation
- The project started in 2019 and will continue through 2024.

The following comments and questions were raised in Working Group discussion of the Community Harvest Assessment Program:

- Comment: This data is illuminating, but instead of focusing on small segments and only a few communities, maybe we should focus our energy on understanding the total harvest numbers.
- Comment: Instead of preselecting communities, we may consider focusing our efforts on the communities where we know the caribou were that year. We could adjust our surveys to mirror the migration patterns.
- Comment: Our primary goal should be to understand the total annual harvest.
- Comment: It is helpful to have more data that helps understand predators.
- Comment: On page 100 of the binder, it shows the percentages of households. It would be helpful to see that data in number of households.
- Q: Is this process considered best practice?  
A: ADF&G has been conducting research of this nature since 1978. We get high response rates and accurate data.

## **VII. Communication Committee Update**

Brittany Sweeney, FWS Outreach Specialist for the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge and a member of the Communications Committee, briefly presented information about the actions of the committee during the past year. For details, please refer to pages 56-58 of the binder.

Brittany led a brainstorming session about ideas for content for the 2023 Caribou Trails newsletter, which gets mailed to everyone in the range of the herd. Ideas/topics discussed include:

- Summary of the action taken by the working group to develop proposals to the Board of Game and Federal Subsistence Board to reduce the bag limit from 5 animals per day to 4 animals annual, only one of which can be a female. Headline idea “Working Group Proposes Drastic Changes.”
- Call of action to communities to work with agencies to submit harvest numbers. Provide information on how overall understanding of harvest numbers can assist with better managing the herd.
- Illustrate how it is important that this isn’t arbitrary – focus on the why.
- Inform that the working group’s decision was focused on the health of the female population and this action may help the herd’s numbers increase.
- Stress the seriousness of the herd’s decline.
- Stress that we all need to do our part and play a role in conservation – that’s why the working group included a resolution to eliminate non-Alaska resident hunting.
- “Where are the Caribou?” Provide information about where the herd was in the last year.

- Provide a historic summary of where the caribou have been over time – through a guest elder.
- Provide a list of communities that are in the range of the herd.
- A highlight of a successful community data collection method to illustrate how important it is to have accurate harvest numbers.

### **VIII. Business Meeting**

Approval of 2021 WACH WG Meeting Summary (p. 116 in WG Binder) – MOTION by Morris Nassuk, second by Neal Dewitt, to approve the 2021 WACH WG meeting summary. Motion PASSED unanimously by voice vote.

Election of Chair – MOTION by Morris Nassuk, second by Neil DeWitt, to nominate Vern Cleveland to serve as Chair of the WACH Working Group for 2023-2025. There was another MOTION by Enoch Mitchell, second by Neil DeWitt to nominate Cyrus Harris to serve as Chair of the WACH Working Group for 2023-2025. Votes were collected and tallied by paper ballot. Vern Cleveland received 8 votes and Cyrus Harris received 5 votes. Vern Cleveland will serve as the WACH Working Group Chair for the 2023-2025 term.

Adding a Mat-Su Borough Seat to the WACH WG – MOTION by Neil DeWitt to add a Mat-Su Borough seat to the WACH WG. The motion did not receive a second. The Working Group asks those who are interested to send a letter of interest and clear rationale for why they are not being represented currently.

Emergency Petition – MOTION by Neil Dewitt, second by Bill Barnhardt, to submit an emergency petition letter to ADF&G for an Agenda Change Request for their January 2023 meeting to consider an emergency regulation change for the Western Arctic Herd to limit harvest to 4 caribou per year only one of which can be a female. Motion FAILED by voice vote – only two WG members voted AYE.

Resolution – MOTION by Dave Kilbourne, second by Neil DeWitt, to encouraging agencies to collaborate to come up with a comprehensive solution, including but not limited to working with Alaska Native Corporations, IRAs, North Slope Borough, and others, to collect more accurate harvest data and return to the Working Group in 2023 with a more reasonable estimate of the harvest. Motion PASSED unanimously by voice vote.

Protection of Calving Grounds – MOTION by Tim Fullman, second by Tom Gray, to submit a letter to the Department of the Interior to add permanent protections to the calving grounds in the NPR-A including increasing the northern boundary to where the protection applies. Motion PASSED by voice vote – only two WG members voted NAY.

### Committee Membership

- Remove Susan Georgette from the Resource Committee and replace with Will Wiese.

2023 WACH Working Group Meeting – The Working Group plans to meet in-person on December 13-14, 2023 in Anchorage. The Technical Committee will meet on December 12<sup>th</sup> in Anchorage. MOTION by Neil DeWitt, second by Tom Gray, to approve the 2023 WACH WG Annual Meeting dates and location. Motion PASSED unanimously by voice vote.

**IX. Adjourn** – MOTION by Tom Gray, second by Neil DeWitt, to adjourn the meeting. Motion PASSED unanimously by voice vote.

## Motions Acted Upon at WACH Working Group Meeting

December 15, 2022

1. Membership Approvals: MOTION by Tim Fullman, second by Neil DeWitt, to approve the following alternate members to the WACH Working Group – Seat 8 alternate Thomas Baker; Seat 15 alternate Johnson Eningowuk; Motion PASSED unanimously on a voice vote.
2. Agenda Approval: MOTION by Neil DeWitt, second by Morris Nassuk, to approve the meeting agenda. Motion PASSED unanimously on a voice vote.
3. WACH Management Level, 2019 WACH Cooperative Management Plan: MOTION by Neil DeWitt, second by Charlie Lean, to set the Management Level for the Western Arctic Herd at “Preservative, Declining” per the 2019 WACH Cooperative Management Plan, Table 1. Motion PASSED on a roll call vote. Votes - Yes: 14; Abstain: 1
4. Submit Proposal to Board of Game and Federal Subsistence Board for Regulation Change: MOTION by Vern Cleveland, second by Tom Gray, to make a proposal to both the Board of Game and the Federal Subsistence Board to change regulations from a bag limit of five caribou per hunter per day, to a total of four caribou per hunter per year, only one of which may be a cow. The proposal includes all management units that contain the Western Arctic Herd including 21B, 22, 23, 26A, 24B, 24C, and 24D. Motion PASSED unanimously on a roll call vote. Votes - Yes: 16
5. Non-Alaska Resident Hunting Restrictions: MOTION by Charlie Lean, second by Tom Gray. RESOLUTION: The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group believes that the ANS threshold has been crossed and urges the State to enact existing regulations in place, now that the ANS threshold has been passed. Motion PASSED on a roll call vote. Votes - Yes: 12; No: 4
6. 2023 North American Caribou Workshop WG Member Attendance: MOTION by Neil DeWitt, second by Tom Gray. The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group agrees to send Cyrus Harris to the conference with Vern Cleveland as the alternate. Motion PASSED unanimously on a voice vote.
7. Approval of 2021 WACH WG Meeting Summary: MOTION by Morris Nassuk, second by Neil DeWitt, to approve the 2021 WACH WG meeting summary. Motion PASSED unanimously by voice vote.
8. Election of Chair: MOTION by Morris Nassuk, second by Neil DeWitt, to nominate Vern Cleveland to serve as Chair of the WACH Working Group for 2023-2025. There was another MOTION by Enoch Mitchell, second by Neil DeWitt to nominate Cyrus Harris to serve as Chair of the WACH Working Group for 2023-2025. Votes were collected and tallied by paper ballot. Vern Cleveland received 8 votes and Cyrus Harris received 5 votes. Vern Cleveland will serve as the WACH Working Group Chair for the 2023-2025 term.
9. Adding a Mat-Su Borough Seat to the WACH WG: MOTION by Neil DeWitt to add a Mat-Su Borough seat to the WACH WG. The motion did not receive a second. The Working Group asks those who are interested to send a letter of interest and clear rationale for why they are not being represented currently.
10. Emergency Petition: MOTION by Neil DeWitt, second by Bill Barnhardt, to submit an emergency petition letter to ADF&G for an Agenda Change Request for their January 2023 meeting to consider an emergency regulation change for the Western Arctic Herd to limit harvest to 4 caribou per year only one of which can be a female. Motion FAILED by voice vote – only two WG members voted AYE.
11. Resolution Concerning Harvest Data: MOTION by Dave Kilbourne, second by Neil DeWitt, to encouraging agencies to collaborate to come up with a comprehensive solution, including but not limited to working with Alaska Native Corporations, IRAs, North Slope Borough, and others, to

collect more accurate harvest data and return to the Working Group in 2023 with a more reasonable estimate of the harvest. Motion PASSED unanimously by voice vote.

12. Protection of Calving Grounds: MOTION by Tim Fullman, second by Tom Gray, to submit a letter to the Department of the Interior to add permanent protections to the calving grounds in the NPR-A including increasing the northern boundary to where the protection applies. Motion PASSED by voice vote – only two WG members voted NAY.
13. Adjournment: MOTION by Tom Gray, second by Neil DeWitt, to adjourn the meeting. Motion PASSED unanimously by voice vote.

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## Assignments Made at WACH Working Group Meeting

December 15, 2022

1. State and Federal Wildlife Regulation Proposal: Holly Spoth-Torres will draft a letter to the Board of Game, for the Chair's signature, providing the Working Group's comments and proposal to change regulations from a bag limit of five caribou per hunter per day, to a total of four caribou per hunter per year, only one of which may be a cow. The proposal includes all management units that contain the Western Arctic Herd including 21B, 22, 23, 26A, 24B, 24C, and 24D.
2. Alaska Board of Game Comment Letter: Holly Spoth-Torres will draft a letter to the Board of Game, for the Chair's signature, providing the Working Group's comments about the following resolution passed: The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group believes that the ANS threshold has been crossed and urges the State to enact existing regulations in place, now that the ANS threshold has been passed.
3. Department of the Interior Comment Letter: Holly Spoth-Torres will work with Resource Development Chair Tim Fullman to draft a letter to the Department of the Interior, for the Chair's signature, requesting them to add permanent protections to the Western Arctic Herd calving grounds in the NPR-A including increasing the northern boundary to where the protection applies.
4. Filling Alternate Seats: Holly Spoth-Torres will work with Working Group members to fill the two vacant alternate seats (Seats 19 and 20).