

Closing remarks from the Dept of Fisheries & Oceans Canada to the NMRWB public hearing regarding Nunavik Beluga management.

By S. Larochelle, F. Dionne & M. Hammill,

DFO Quebec region

January 23, 2020

We thank you for the opportunity to participate in the public hearing this week. We have appreciated everyone's input on how we may move forward in managing beluga in a way that respects the rights of hunters to harvest and also follows the principles of conservation (as identified under NILCA).

We have heard from many groups this week-all presentations reflected the concerns of each group. We had Makivik who presented their vision; we heard from LNUKS, RNUKS and elders who wanted to guarantee hunting access close to their communities to protect the Inuit way of life and values.

However, during this meeting nobody tried to present the perspective of the beluga-we feel that this is key-after all, if beluga disappear or severely decline, then the Inuit way of life will be severely affected. During all of the meeting everyone talked about how they wanted to kill more beluga, but nobody offered ways forward to ensure a healthy population available for future generations.

As you know, the first management plan was introduced in the mid-1980s-the objective then, and has always been to try to protect the EHB and UB beluga, to ensure that beluga would be available for hunters then (nearly 40 years ago) for today and for future generations. We understand that following the management plan has been a challenge for Nunavik hunters. We would like for the record to state, that we appreciate their efforts, and because of their efforts the EHB beluga stock has stabilized or even increased. This is a significant achievement and it was accomplished by the hunters from Nunavik!

At the end of each management plan we arrive at a point where difficult decisions are needed. Beluga management in Nunavik is difficult, it is probably one of the most complex management approaches of wildlife that any group has ever undertaken. We are trying to manage the interests of 14 communities over a huge geographical area, where people may or may not have access to 3 different stocks of beluga, where a very small population, numbering around 3200 animals, is mixing with probably the largest single population of beluga in the world! We have heard at this meeting various positions-many have argued that the current situation is broken, others have offered a vision, with few details, on how beluga management should evolve, still others have said they support conservation, but they want access to belugas close to their communities, without thoughts to the cumulative impacts of their requests on the beluga population! We have listened to expectations of everyone and the expectations appear to surpass current understanding of what the EHB population might be able to support, but this needs to be examined.

We (DFO) came to this meeting to hear ideas on how to move forward. We are open to new ideas, thinking outside of the box on how we might move forward in managing EHB and UB beluga

management in the future. Some have proposed that we jump into a new approach, let us test the waters and see what happens. We can fix things afterwards. If we were discussing the WHB beluga stock, with a current population of about 54000 animals, we could afford to try an open approach, then after 2-4 years evaluate the performance of the new management approach –we could do all of this, knowing we were discussing a very healthy population, the largest beluga population in the world and we could do this without any concern for the future of the population. But in Nunavik, we are dealing with an EHB stock of 3200 animals. We see elsewhere in the world that beluga populations that fall below 2000 animals start to have problems-habitat changes, social interactions, new predators become increasingly important in driving the dynamics of these ‘small’ populations-below 2000 individuals it appears that beluga populations do not recover or recover very, very slowly-in an earlier presentation to the Board I showed that if the population declined to 2000 animals, the harvest would have to be reduced to 40 EHB animals and at best it would take over 20 years for the population to recover even to its current size. I don’t think that we want to go there. We argue, that we cannot afford an open approach and look at the impacts somewhere into the future, because at best we would need to reduce harvests, at the very worst everyone in eastern Hudson Bay suffers a major decline in beluga availability that will take decades to recover from, if at all.

We have heard from many that control of beluga management must move away from the quota system. DFO is interested in looking at new approaches and the ideas that could be put forward to understand how this might take place. We have heard a few ideas for partial plans- even at this late stage, few have offered details to help us move forward over the next 2-5 years. If we are to move forward, the Board will need to make a case to the Minister, who under the landclaim retains ultimate authority for conservation- that a new system will still respect harvest rights, but will respect the principles of conservation.

If we want to alter the system, the first thing the minister will raise with the Board will be conservation of the EHB beluga stock. She will ask how any new system will respect the principles of conservation. Therefore at some point we will need to discuss do we want to maintain a beluga stock at the same size as now, or do we want to see some increase. I know this sounds technical-but if you wish to develop a business case for the Board, so that they can assure the Minister, that they have taken conservation seriously, then the Board will need an outline of a plan to move forward.

So, after we decide on our management objective, then we need to consider how are we going to try to respect this, do we want to harvest using the seasonal approach? -if we want to use seasons, how will we decide when a season opens and closes, how will we decide on the length of the season. If we do not wish to manage by season, perhaps we wish to manage by geographical area, probably harvesting only beluga close to our community. So, if we do this, how should we define an area where beluga are allowed to be harvested and at the same time, will we decide on areas where beluga will be protected ie areas where harvesting will not occur. We have seen a model developed in Sanikiluaq –there, they developed a local approach based on seasonal openings that helps them respect conservation, yet meets their needs-this was based in part on traditional knowledge and in part using science and it resulted from considerable discussion.

A more difficult subject is -what happens if hunters do not respect the rules? We have not heard how a new approach would ensure that hunters follow the rules. If we have a set of rules, perhaps one way forward could be local bylaws-if somebody breaks the bylaws, then perhaps there is a way in the

community that the infraction could be dealt with. I do not know how- What would be an Inuit approach to discourage people from re-offending? Who would be the deciding group to apply a penalty-what are the legal implications???Can the RNUK fine the LNUKs if a community is not following their management plan?

Then once we have our plan, how might we evaluate how well this 'new' approach has worked in achieving our objectives, how much did it meet Inuit needs, how much did it meet the needs for conservation, and renewal? Remember, because the EHB beluga population is small, there is not a lot of margin for error.

We have boiled down an extremely complex idea into a few paragraphs. We are at the end of a management plan. We cannot go into the next management cycle without a plan. We know people wish to say that they will manage belugas but within the current context we need a structure that outlines the management approach that will be developed across the 3 regions or by community, we need to know what their management objective will be, we need to know what will be done to respect this objective ; what will be done to ensure that there is compliance and how will it all be coordinated. In the event that there is non-compliance, what is the Inuit way to encourage people to follow the rules, and in the rare case, if hunters do not follow the rules, what will be done to encourage people to be more respectful of the rules? We have heard many very interesting ideas, but it has not been until today, that we have heard these ideas and much needs to be fleshed out. We appreciate Putulik's summary to request a total of 1300 animals over 3 years or about 433 per year. This compares to an average of 300 animals over the last 4 years. This allows us to evaluate the impact on the herd.

In summary, we will return south with the message that hunters want a new management approach; there is an urgent need for a new approach, but we cannot provide any details to our minister on what the Board might submit to her , because unfortunately, we do not have a detailed Nunavik framework to explain. We are very encouraged by what we have heard from some communities today, and I know everyone realises that time for the current plan is running out, but everyone needs time with their communities to develop the new approach, a new wildlife management system that respects Nunavik Inuit harvesting rights that are governed by and subject to the principles of conservation; a system which maintains a vital, healthy wildlife beluga populations capable of sustaining harvesting needs as defined in the claim; a plan that ensures the protection of habitat; and leads to the restoration and revitalization of a depleted beluga population. For the moment our recommendation to the Board is for some rollover of the current plan, with some adjustments and that work begin in earnest to develop the new framework. Even this approach does not leave much time, work has begun here, but many details need to be fleshed out! The momentum must be maintained to develop a new approach, complete consultations with our communities and to ensure coordination of beluga harvesting across the NILCA region.