



NEWS RELEASE

January 7, 2026 - Old Crow, Yukon

## **Decline of the Porcupine Caribou Herd highlights the need for greater habitat protection**

Earlier today, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game announced that the Porcupine Caribou Herd has declined from an estimated 218,000 caribou in 2017, an all-time high since photocensus counting began in 1972, to approximately 143,000 caribou in 2025, according to aerial surveys conducted in July.

For the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (VGFN), Vadzaih (caribou) are central to our culture, identity, and way of life. For thousands of years, we have lived alongside Vadzaih, who provide everything needed to thrive in our northern homeland.

While this decline is concerning, it is not unexpected and does not, in itself, constitute a crisis. Our historical knowledge, passed down through countless generations, teaches us that the population of the Porcupine Caribou Herd is cyclical and influenced by many factors, including weather, forage availability and predation. Community observations and scientific data demonstrate that the Porcupine Caribou Herd has also experienced declining adult cow and bull survival in recent years. There are also human-caused pressures, including habitat degradation, climate change, and resource development. Porcupine caribou require healthy habitat and vibrant ecosystems.

The Porcupine Caribou Management Board (PCMB), established under the *Porcupine Caribou Management Agreement* (1985), brings together the eight Parties representing user groups of the Porcupine Caribou Herd in Canada, including VGFN. These Parties work collaboratively to manage the herd and conserve it for present and future generations.

In February, the PCMB will hold its annual harvest meeting in Inuvik to review its harvest management recommendations. The recent population estimate indicates the herd is still in the Green Zone of the Harvest Management Plan developed by the PCMB and the parties, which supports continued harvest with no restrictions when the population is above 115,000 animals. However, VGFN recognizes that continued attention and careful management are essential and remains confident in the PCMB's evidence-based work to conserve the herd.

Protecting the herd's habitat will be a critical part of careful and effective management. Healthy calving grounds, wintering grounds, and migration routes, free from industrial development and resource extraction, and responsible harvesting are vital to the long-term sustainability of the herd.

Within our Traditional Territory, VGFN has already protected large areas of caribou habitat and continues to pursue permanent measures to safeguard the herd's critical wintering grounds from harmful disturbances. We know that industrial development, including oil and gas activities, has significant and lasting impacts on the herd. For this reason, VGFN strongly condemns decisions by the



Trump Administration to open the entire Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, the critical calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd, to drilling. These sacred lands, known to us as *Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandalii Goodlit* (The Sacred Place Where Life Begins), sustain the herd during the most sensitive time in their life cycle. As those closest to the caribou, we know that drilling in these lands would cause irreversible harm and threaten the future of the herd.

VGN remains committed to working with our management partners and our community to ensure decisions related to the management of the Porcupine Caribou Herd are guided by both our historical knowledge and western science. By respecting natural cycles and protecting the land that sustains the Porcupine Caribou Herd, we can help ensure it remains healthy and strong for future generations.

#### *Quotes*

“Across North America, we have seen caribou herds collapse, and we have witnessed the devastating impacts this has had on the communities who rely on them. The Porcupine Caribou Herd is one of the last healthy herds in the world, and we must do everything in our power to ensure it remains strong. We will continue to work collaboratively through the PCMB, bringing together our historical knowledge and western science, to protect this herd, and we will hold our partners, in Canada and the U.S, accountable to do the same.”

**— Chief Pauline Frost, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation**

“News of the decline in the Porcupine Caribou Herd population numbers is upsetting but not surprising. We have been witnessing firsthand the significant changes to our lands and waters from climate change, which affect the caribou and our community of Old Crow. We need to do everything we can to protect the herd. Protecting the Porcupine caribou means protecting the heart of who we are as Gwich'in. It means safeguarding the continued health and sovereignty of our community.”

**— Deputy Chief Harold Frost Jr., Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Representative on the Gwich'in Steering Committee Board**

“The caribou have always taken care of us, and it is our responsibility to take care of them. We must protect the land and manage harvest with care, taking only what is needed so that the herd can stay strong.”

**— Marvin Frost Sr., Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Elder and Representative on the Porcupine Caribou Management Board**



**Vuntut Gwitchin  
First Nation**

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PO Box 94  
Old Crow, Yukon Y0B 1N0  
Phone: (867) 966-3261

For all media inquiries, please contact:

Ken Kyikavichik, Executive Director  
[ken.kyikavichik@vgfn.ca](mailto:ken.kyikavichik@vgfn.ca)  
(825) 965-8586