

**Alaska Wilderness League * Audubon Alaska * Blue Goose Alliance
Center for Biological Diversity * Defenders of Wildlife * Earthjustice
Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges * League of Conservation Voters
National Wildlife Refuge Association * Pacific Environment * Sierra Club
The Wilderness Society * Wilderness Watch**

September 21, 2016

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Chair
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
304 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell, Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
304 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Murkowski and Ranking Member Cantwell:

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters nationwide, we are writing to express our strong opposition to S. 3204, the “King Cove Road Land Exchange Act,” which would force construction of a destructive road through the heart of Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. A road through Izembek would cause irreparable damage to a globally important conservation area, and set a precedent that jeopardizes wildlife refuges and wilderness protections on public lands across the country. We respectfully request that this letter be included in the record when the legislation is heard by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on September 22, 2016.

The Izembek National Wildlife Refuge is an internationally recognized wetland and coastal habitat for iconic wildlife, including brown bears, caribou, salmon and hundreds of species of migratory birds. One of America’s most unique and ecologically significant wildlife refuges, this extraordinary landscape in Alaska is almost entirely designated wilderness. S. 3204 would strip irreplaceable wildlands out of this cherished refuge in exchange for comparably low quality state lands in order to build the detrimental road.

Legislating a road through Izembek’s fragile wetland complex would not only severely damage this treasured ecosystem and threaten the survival of imperiled species, but would also undermine the integrity of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Fish and Wildlife Service managers have repeatedly determined that a road would cause irreversible harm to the wildlife and habitat Izembek was established to protect, making it incompatible with the primary purposes of the refuge and the conservation mission of the Refuge System. Legislating incompatible development in a refuge would set a negative precedent that also contravenes the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act mandate to “ensure that the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of the System are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

In addition, de-designating wilderness to cut the destructive road through Izembek would violate the very purpose of the Wilderness Act to permanently protect public wildlands. It would undermine the wilderness values in the refuge and permanently alter the character of this biologically essential landscape, creating dangerous national policy implications for wild places throughout the United States and inviting more such attacks in the future.

The Izembek road controversy was already addressed during the Clinton Administration when the federal government provided substantial funding to resolve King Cove's medical needs in an effort to end this decades-long dispute. At that time the federal government allocated over \$37 million to upgrade access to quality medical care for the community in lieu of building the environmentally destructive proposed road. In fact, American taxpayers have now spent over \$50 million improving medical access in support of that commitment, yet demands for the damaging road persist.

The Interior Department has studied this issue exhaustively, and repeatedly concluded that the road should not be built. In 2013, after a comprehensive four year analysis including over 130 stakeholder meetings, extensive consultation with state and local governments, numerous visits to the region and consideration of more than 70,000 public comments, Secretary Jewell reaffirmed that a road through Izembek would cause irreversible damage to natural resources and should be rejected. Just last year, the U.S. District Court of Alaska upheld the Secretary's decision to protect the refuge. Most recently, the Interior Department requested the Army Corps of Engineers conduct a study to evaluate additional non-road transportation alternatives for King Cove. The study established that other options exist.

Diverse voices have consistently demonstrated fierce and broad opposition to the ill-advised road. The Association of Village Council Presidents, representing 56 Native villages in western Alaska, formally opposed the road due to the impact it would have on their subsistence way of life. The former U.S. Indian Health Service medical director for King Cove believes that during severe winter storms, due to ice and avalanche conditions "any attempt to travel the proposed road will be foolish beyond any reason...and would clearly jeopardize life." The taxpayer organization, Citizens Against Government Waste, has profiled the proposed road as a fiscal boondoggle, noting that the government has already spent tens of millions of dollars to address local concerns and prevent the need for a road through Izembek. Former Department of Interior officials from the Bush, Clinton, Ford and Nixon administrations have stated that the road has long been a "terrible idea" and remains so today.

Any solutions Congress considers to address King Cove's medical needs must not undermine the continued preservation of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and the bedrock environmental laws protecting this extraordinary area. We strongly urge you to uphold the integrity of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Wilderness Act and our country's conservation legacy by rejecting S. 3204 and any similar proposals to cut a road through the heart of this internationally significant refuge and wilderness.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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Cc: Members of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate