



PRESS RELEASE

Contact:

Ernest Weiss
King Cove Mayor
(907) 947-8521
eweiss@arctic.net

Gary Hennigh
King Cove City Manager
cell (907) 350-1372
ghennighmgr@gci.net

Della Trumble
President, King Cove Corporation
cell (907) 223-9289
dellat@arctic.net

Laura Tanis
P.I.O. - Aleutians East Borough
cell (907) 947-5778
ltanis@aeboro.org

Izembek and Alaska Peninsula Refuge Enhancement Act Goes to Mark-up Today in Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources

Land Exchange Bill Would Provide King Cove, Alaska with a Long-Term Solution to its Transportation Access Problem

Washington, D.C. – Sept. 11, 2008 – Native and community leaders from King Cove, Alaska and the Aleutians East Borough are praising Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski for pushing to get S. 1680 in front of the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources for a mark-up today. If the committee approves the bill, it will move to the Senate floor for a vote. The Izembek Enhancement Act proposes increasing the size of the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula Wildlife Refuges by more than 61,000 acres in exchange for a small, narrow road corridor leading from King Cove to an all-weather airport in Cold Bay, Alaska. The legislation would provide King Cove residents with a long-term solution to its transportation access problem by creating a planning process which will lead to decision to build a road.

“We are grateful to Senator Murkowski and her staff for the tremendous amount of work they put into this bill,” said Stanley Mack, Aleutians East Borough (AEB) Mayor. “The senator recognizes the significant challenges residents face in this remote community. This issue is so important for the health, safety and the quality-of-life of the residents of King Cove. Senator Murkowski sponsored this bill and has stood behind the residents while supporting their efforts to get a road to Cold Bay’s airport. We also want to thank Sen. Jeff Bingaman, Committee Chairman, for his bipartisan work with Sen. Murkowski, which got the bill to mark-up,” Mayor Mack added. “King Cove also received key support from Alaska Senator Ted Stevens and Hawaii Senator Daniel Akaka, both of whom are co-sponsors of the bill, and have pushed hard for its passage.”

The Senate Committee scheduled a hearing on the issue on April 15, 2008. Afterward, staff members from Committee Chairman Senator Jeff Bingaman’s and Senator Ron Wyden’s offices

have been considering a number of management regulations and compromise language to incorporate into the bill to balance the needs of human life and possible environmental impacts to the Izembek Wildlife National Refuge. That compromise includes prohibiting the use of the road to any kind of commercial activity. An environmental impact statement must also be conducted before a road corridor can be built. The Secretary of the Interior must also determine that the land exchange and the road corridor are in the public interest.

“We are giving up an unprecedented amount of valuable habitat land for a road corridor through the wilderness,” said Della Trumble, President of the King Cove (Native) Corporation. “But it’s worth it if we can protect the health and safety of residents who need to be medevaced out of the community. This bill would also dramatically improve the quality of life of the mostly Aleut residents living in King Cove by providing us with a link to the outside world. The Native people have proven to be good stewards while subsisting off of this land for thousands of years. We will continue to protect this precious environment as we always have. This is a huge step forward.”

The King Cove (Native) Corporation (created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) is offering 18,000 acres of its prime habitat as part of the land exchange legislation. The State of Alaska is proposing to give the federal government 43,000 acres, for a total of 61,000 acres. More than 45,000 acres of that land would be designated as wilderness.

“This is a win-win solution for everyone concerned,” said King Cove Mayor Ernest Weiss. “Not only does the nation benefit from tens of thousands of new wilderness land, but this road access has the potential to save many lives over the years.”

On April 23, 2008, members of the House of Natural Resources Committee overwhelmingly passed the companion bill (H.R. 2801) in a mark-up hearing and sent it to the full House unaltered. A few weeks later, Hawaii Senator Akaka signed on as the co-sponsor of the Senate bill. The Hawaii legislator had supported building the road when the issue was brought before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee a decade ago. Senator Akaka expressed sympathy for the health and safety of the people of King Cove as well as for the rights of Native peoples.

Officials from the Aleutians East Borough, the City of King Cove and the King Cove Corporation are now grateful that the bill has made it to mark-up in the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

“We’re excited this day has finally come,” said Trumble, “And we’re optimistic as this legislation moves forward.”

Background Information:

Since August of 2007, the Aleutians East Borough has operated commercial hovercraft service between the City of King Cove and the City of Cold Bay. However, mechanical problems and poor weather have combined to keep the hovercraft out of service much more than was ever anticipated. Furthermore, the hovercraft is running at a net annual deficit of more than one million dollars.

“Unfortunately, the hovercraft is too expensive for the Borough to maintain, and the craft’s reliability, due to our severe weather conditions, does not operate on a predictable basis either,” said King Cove Mayor Ernest Weiss. “This land exchange legislation will provide the community with a road that’s safe and dependable while offering the federal government a massive amount of pristine land, most of which will go into wilderness status with passage of the bill.”

Before a hovercraft was available in King Cove, transporting emergency medical patients from the City of King Cove to the City of Cold Bay during thick fog or a storm was impossible. Flights from King Cove’s unpaved airstrip are delayed or canceled about 50% of the time. There are no roads connecting King Cove to the City of Cold Bay, where an all-weather airport is located. King Cove is often plagued by gale force winds and dense fog. Sometimes Cold Bay (the body of water between the City of King Cove and the City of Cold Bay) has 15 - 20 foot seas in the winter. Even with the hovercraft theoretically available, factors such as poor weather and mechanical malfunctions have prevented hovercraft service for days at a time.

The Aleut people have lived in this remote area of the Alaska Peninsula for more than 4,000 years. There are more than 14 miles of roads traversing the Izembek Wilderness and another 35 miles in the Izembek Refuge, dating back to World War II when thousands of GIs traveled throughout the area. In 1980, the federal government designated a major portion of the land that lies between King Cove and Cold Bay as wilderness. That action prohibited the construction of a road between the two communities.

In 1998, a land exchange bill was introduced in Congress, but environmentalists lobbied hard against it. As a compromise, Congress appropriated \$37.5 million under the King Cove Health and Safety Act for improvements to the King Cove medical clinic and airport and to fund a marine transportation system link (the hovercraft) between the two cities. Even though the clinic that was built is state-of-the art, the small community is unable to attract doctors with the skill level needed to handle emergencies and life-threatening illnesses. A multi-million-dollar hovercraft was also purchased to ferry residents from King Cove to the Cold Bay airport. However, officials with the Aleutians East Borough say it’s now obvious that the hovercraft is not a long-term solution and that a road corridor connecting King Cove and Cold Bay is the best possible option.

If all proceeds as proposed, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) would transfer a 1600-acre island near Kodiak, which the Coast Guard will soon surplus, plus approximately 206 acres, for a road corridor through a very small portion of the Izembek Refuge. Approximately 97 acres of the corridor would be in the wilderness section of the refuge. The state would pay for the cost of the road corridor construction through its annual STIP (Statewide Transportation Improvement Program).

Support for the legislation has come from the local, state and national level. Dale Hall, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, also expressed his support for the legislation.

“This proposal would offer approximately 38 acres for every acre of wetlands and wildlife habitat, and 200 acres for every acre of wilderness exchanged,” Hall said during his testimony last fall. “The Administration recognizes the legitimate needs of Alaska residents to have access to medical, dental and other health care,” he added.

Last year, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin sent letters of support for the bill to Alaska’s Congressional Delegation. In June of 2007, Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) and Senators Lisa Murkowski and Ted Stevens introduced companion legislation (H.R. 2801 and S.1680)

authorizing the land exchange. Last fall, the Alaska Federation of Natives weighed in and passed a resolution in favor of the land exchange bill. The National Congress of American Indians has also passed a resolution in support of the bill.

“We need a safe, reliable transportation option,” said Aleutians East Borough Mayor Stanley Mack. “A road connection to Cold Bay would save lives. It’s the only workable, long-term solution.”

###