



Natural Resources Committee

Press Release

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Bill To Allow Isolated Aleut Villagers In Rural Alaska Access To Region's Airport Introduced In U.S. House; 61,000 Acres To Be Added To Izembek & Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuges

Washington, D.C. – Legislation that will add more than 61,000 acres to two Alaska wildlife refuges while allowing for a road to connect an isolated Aleut Native community to the region's only safe and reliable airport has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.

This major land exchange will be the first new wilderness land designated in Alaska by Congress in more than 25 years.

"The Izembek and Alaska Peninsula Refuge and Wilderness Enhancement and King Cove Safe Access Act" (H.R. 2801) was introduced by **U.S. Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), the Ranking Member on the House Natural Resources Committee.** A companion bill is to be introduced in the U.S. Senate by **Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska)** and is cosponsored by **Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska).**

The legislation is also endorsed by **Alaska Gov. Sara Palin**, community and tribal leaders, and the residents of King Cove. (Attached is a letter from Gov. Palin regarding the proposal.)

"The Aleut people have lived in King Cove for more than 4,000 years, yet they have been completely isolated from the rest of the region since 1980 when the federal government created a wilderness area between King Cove and Cold Bay," **Young** said. "The people of King Cove need a safe and reliable road to be able to get to Cold Bay where the state's third largest airport runway exists.

"Because of the horrific winds and cold weather, a land route is vital for the residents to be able to travel between King Cove and Cold Bay. Unfortunately, several people have been killed trying to fly from King Cove to Cold Bay during inclement weather because no road currently exists.

"This new legislation will correct this problem while adding more than 61,000 acres to the two national wildlife refuges in the region. This is a common sense solution to a problem that should have been corrected many years ago."

Under H.R. 2801, 61,723 acres would be added to the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula Wildlife Refuges. Of this new acreage, 45,493 acres would be designated as wilderness. Almost 43,000 acres of this land will be transferred to the refuges from the State of Alaska. The King Cove Corporation, which was created under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, is transferring more than 18,000 acres to the refuges. In addition, the State of Alaska has agreed to designate Kinzaroff Lagoon near Cold Bay as the State Game Refuge.

In exchange, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will transfer 206 acres for the road between King Cove and Cold Bay. The road will be funded by the State of Alaska.

“We are so grateful that the Alaska Delegation, the Governor and the State of Alaska are supporting this land exchange legislation,” said **Ernest Weiss, Mayor of King Cove**. “This is a win-win for everyone involved. The people of King Cove would get reliable access to Cold Bay with minimum impact to the environment, while thousands of acres of valuable land are added to the refuge and to the wilderness.”

“We deserve safe and reliable access just like everybody else in the United States,” said **Della Trumble, president of the King Cove Corporation**. “We’re hopeful this legislation will finally give us a solution to this access problem.”

Background Information & Legislative History

- Under the bill, the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Secretary of Transportation, the State of Alaska, King Cove, Agdaagux Tribal Council, and Aleutians East Borough, will determine the route of the road. The road will be subject to mitigation measures recommended in a 2004 environmental impact statement.
- Congressman Don Young introduced similar legislation, H.R. 2259, in the 105th Congress. That bill was reported by the Resources Committee but saw no further action. A Senate companion had passed the Senate but, too, was stalled through the intervention of the Clinton Administration and some environmental groups.
- In 1998 Senator Stevens appropriated funding for a health clinic and a hovercraft to assist King Cove with its needs.
- However, no doctor is locating to King Cove, and the City and Borough have determined the operating costs of a hovercraft are too high to be sustained.
- King Cove, the State of Alaska and the Alaska Congressional Delegation have determined a road makes the most sense to provide safe and reliable access for the people of King Cove.

Why The Road Is Vital To The People Of King Cove

- King Cove, Alaska, is located 625 air miles from Anchorage, Alaska, on the south side of the Alaska Peninsula, on a sand spit fronting Deer Passage and Deer Island.
- It is accessible only by air and water and it is one of the most geographically isolated areas of the State of Alaska.
- Constant adverse weather and limiting physical topography make traveling in and out of King Cove directly by air dangerous and impractical much of the time.
- King Cove is the homeland of Aleut people who are federally recognized as indigenous people of the United States.
- The Agdaagux Tribal Council, which is the federally recognized tribal government for King Cove, recognizes that most of the residents of King Cove are direct descendants of the original Aleut inhabitants.
- In the 1940s, an airport capable of access by jets was constructed by the United States Army at Cold Bay, which is approximately 25 surface miles north of King Cove, to support World War II-related national security needs.

- While the Cold Bay Airport, which is now a civilian airport operated by the State of Alaska, is the lifeline for the King Cove people to the outside world, particularly for the life, safety, and health needs of the indigenous residents, there is no surface access between King Cove and the airport.
- Nearly all of the land between King Cove and Cold Bay is owned by the Federal Government as part of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and managed as wilderness.
- The Agdaagux Tribal Council maintains that the Council and the indigenous Aleut people of King Cove were not consulted before the land that separates residents from the nearest all-weather airport was designated as wilderness, even though approximately 1,292 people across the United States, Canada, and Europe received notice of the potential designation and during 1969 and 1970, and were expressly invited by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife (the predecessor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) to participate in the process of considering whether the land should be managed as wilderness.
- The Council regards the failure of the Federal government to consult with the Council and the indigenous Aleut people of King Cove as a “wrong and troubling action taken by the federal government.”
- The Council submits that dozens of King Cove residents have died or suffered grave health consequences in the past 30 years because the residents could not reach timely medical assistance in Anchorage, Alaska, that can only be accessed via the all-weather Cold Bay Airport.
- The Council fully endorses and supports the construction of a road between King Cove and the Cold Bay Airport as an expression of, and commitment to, self-determination for the Aleut people of King Cove who were not consulted before the land vital to the survival of the Aleut people of King Cove was designated as wilderness.

Additional Information

- There is already a network of existing roads in Cold Bay that reach into the Izembek Refuge and Wilderness areas.
- These Cold Bay roads have long been used by sport hunters and fishers, birdwatchers, other visitors, and Federal employees without any known significant adverse impacts to fish and wildlife populations in the Refuge.
- There was no known opposition from environmentalists to this Refuge/Wilderness road system.
- King Cove requests the same kind of safe, reliable access enjoyed by people living on the “other side” of the Izembek Wilderness boundary.

For more information, access the Committee on Natural Resources’ Minority website at:
<http://republicans.resourcescommittee.house.gov/index.shtml>

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