



## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Alaska Community and Native Leaders Tell Congress Why the Land Trade Bill is Critical to their Health, Safety and Quality of Life**

#### **Proponents Testify at the House Natural Resources Committee Tomorrow in Support of H.R. 2801, the Izembek Wilderness Enhancement Act**

Washington, D.C. – Oct. 30, 2007 – Legislation proposing an unprecedented land exchange between the State of Alaska, the King Cove Corporation and the federal government is getting a hearing before the House Natural Resources Committee tomorrow on Capitol Hill. The hearing will take place at 2 p.m. Eastern time (10 a.m. Alaska time) in room 1324 of the Longworth House Building. It will focus on H.R. 2801, a bill that would add 61,723 acres of key wildlife habitat to the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula Wildlife Refuges. In exchange, the state would receive title to a small amount of land for a single-lane gravel road through Alaska's Izembek National Wildlife Refuge from King Cove to Cold Bay, a community located about 25 miles away. The road corridor would provide residents with safe and reliable transportation access, a lifeline that's crucial for health, safety and quality of life factors.

Della Trumble, president of the King Cove Corporation, says dependable and safe transportation in and out of King Cove is essential for the city's sustainable future and continues to be the top priority. Trumble is an Aleut

Native and was born and raised in King Cove. She is one of the witnesses testifying in support of the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula Refuge and Wilderness Enhancement Act.

“I am deeply connected to the land that you know as the Izembek Refuge through my ancestors, who lived and fed themselves on this wilderness for 4,000 years,” she said. “They speak through me in asking for support of H.R. 2801.”

Traveling from King Cove to Cold Bay’s all-weather airport can be extremely difficult and even impossible at times because King Cove is often plagued by gale force winds or fog.

“Our weather is some of the most treacherous in the world with 15-20 foot seas in winter and winds often more than 50 miles per hour throughout the year,” said Aleutians East Borough Mayor Stanley Mack, an Aleut Native who grew up in King Cove. “In winter, we are further tormented with storm winds in excess of 100 mph. In summer, we are plagued by dense fog. Flights are delayed or canceled about 50% of the time.”

“That may sound like a minor inconvenience, unless of course it happens on a day when a child becomes suddenly very ill, or a fisherman is injured repairing his boat or an elder is found unconscious. Then it is anguish,” Trumble said. “For some families in King Cove, it has meant a tragedy. Since 1979, eleven people have died while flying in this flight corridor during questionable weather.”

The Aleut people of this community have lived in this remote area of the Alaska Peninsula for more than 4,000 years. In 1980, the federal government designated a major portion of the land that lies between King Cove and Cold Bay as wilderness, without consulting or informing the indigenous people. That action prohibited the construction of a road between the two communities.

In 1998, a similar bill with considerably less land 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, airport and a marine transportation system link 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 other life-threatening illnesses. A multi-million dollar hovercraft was also purchased to ferry residents to the Cold Bay airport. However, officials with the Aleutians East Borough say it’s now clear that the hovercraft is not the solution.

“It is terribly expensive to operate the hovercraft now and costs will only

go up,” said Mack. “Detailed financial projections have concluded that a \$500,000 to \$700,000 annual subsidy is going to be required. This annual subsidy is simply not in the realm of fiscal or political reality for a government organization the size of the Aleutians East Borough. In addition, we cannot forecast the operational windows that will give us reliability, given the variability of the winds and weather. It is clear that the hovercraft will not be able to operate anywhere near a 12 month/365 day schedule,” Mack added.

Members of the King Cove Corporation decided this time around, they would be willing to give up a large amount of their valuable land because this transportation access is so important to the community. Trumble is asking members of the House Natural Resources Committee to give the value of this bargain an objective and thorough review.

The King Cove Corporation (created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) is relinquishing more than 18,000 acres. The State of Alaska has brought nearly 43,000 acres to this land exchange. In exchange, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) would transfer a 1600-acre island near Kodiak, which the Coast Guard will soon surplus, and 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. As part of the legislation, 45,493 acres of state and King Cove Corporation-donated land would be added to the wilderness. The state would pay for the cost of the road corridor construction through its annual STIP (Statewide Transportation Improvement Program).

“This land we are giving up is very important to our shareholders and the nation,” said Trumble. “It is some of the most valuable wildlife habitat in the area. It’s accessible to the Cold Bay Airport, and it’s highly valued by the Fish and Wildlife Service as a key addition to the Alaska Peninsula and the Izembek Refuge complex.”

Dale Hall, the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will also testify at the hearing. In June, Hall wrote a letter to the House of Representatives praising the land trade bill. Hall said the lands include large areas of tundra swan nesting, as well as caribou movement, and their wilderness values are significant.

Two witnesses testifying in opposition to the legislation are David Raskin from the Friends of Alaska Wildlife Refuges and Nicole Whittington-Evans from the Wilderness Society. Those two groups along with more than a dozen other environmental organizations signed a letter and sent it to Congress in June, stating their opposition to the bill.

“Our critics talk of impacts to the waterfowl and caribou from the road we desire,” said Mack. “They speak of setting a precedent of allowing no road in the Izembek wilderness. Today, 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 fact, there are roads used today, roads that lead to the real heart of the Izembek Refuge.”

Although environmentalists are opposed to the legislation, the bill has broad support across the state. Earlier this year, Governor Sarah Palin sent letters of support for the bill to Alaska’s Congressional Delegation. In June, Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) and Senators Lisa Murkowski and Ted Stevens introduced companion legislation (H.R. 2801 and S.1680). Just last weekend, the Alaska Federation of Natives weighed in and passed a resolution in favor of the land exchange bill.

“We are completely supported by all local governments, our tribes, the State of Alaska, the Aleut Corporation, and the Alaska Federation of Natives in this endeavor,” said Mack. “We need the freedom, safety and peace of mind of having a road connection to the Cold Bay airport. This is a life and death issue to the Aleut people.”

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