

# King Cove's road to reason

By Katherine Reedy-Maschner

In the decade-long fury over a 9-mile single-lane road easement from the Aleut village of King Cove to Cold Bay, Alaska, proposed by the Aleut after several fatal plane crashes and deaths resulting from delayed medical care, a claim by environmental groups, western Alaska Native entities and other opponents that the route is really for transporting fish has grown increasingly louder as the road comes ever closer to being a reality.

This 238-acre easement is requested in exchange for 61,723 acres of state and tribal lands that would be deeded to the federal government, and marks a substantial increase from the 1998 offer of 650 acres of tribal lands. This would be an unprecedented land swap, and a terrific deal for the two wildlife refuges that would gain acreage.

There have been many criticisms of the road: wildlife habitat disturbance, claims that air and sea access is in fact safer than roads, and that this sets a dangerous precedent for altering the status of all wildlife refuges, specifically for mineral exploration. In 1998, 56 Native villages in western Alaska passed a resolution against the road claiming that it would threaten their subsistence culture by harming the migratory waterfowl in the Izembek Na-

tional Wildlife Refuge, and especially that this will affect Yukon-Kuskokwim salmon runs, since it will be easier for local fishermen to transport fish. This included claims that Peter Pan Seafoods in King Cove is really the proponent of the route to Cold Bay so they can ship to market faster and move their largely foreign workforce more easily and cheaply. Underpinning this protest was that a road would give the Aleut an economic advantage over other Alaska fishermen and processors in the wild salmon markets. As it is now, small airplanes and boats move workers into King Cove, but only when the weather will allow it. Currently, frozen and canned seafood is barged out of King Cove with several days' travel to markets.

No cannery official has entered the dialogue except to say that they do not oppose what the villagers want. Peter Pan and the Native and municipal entities of King Cove have a good relationship but argue that they never collaborated on this road. The local people insist that this has always been about safe transportation: to end the most uncertain and white-knuckle travel experience imaginable.

But why is it not also about the fish? These communities have been struggling to diversify their economies so that their children's children can live there. Salmon permits are in fewer and fewer local hands,

living and fishing expenses are astronomical, the fleet is aging, and kids are waiting to inherit operations that may never be available to them. The youth do not want processing jobs — there's no status on the slimelines. These jobs mean answering to bosses, long hours, less pay and no fun. Yet they will still undoubtedly reach for something related to the fishing industry, related to the sea and its resources, because that is what they know best. Getting fish to market is just as necessary to the health and viability of King Cove as being able to use their lifeline to health care in Anchorage.

Value-added processing and direct marketing of seafood products is the latest way to survive as major processors expand into farmed markets. Aleutia is such a venture for the Aleutians East Borough, which relies on a raw fish tax for its annual budget. Aleutia fishermen must take care of each fish, to minimize bruising and other damage that could affect value. They catch fewer fish, but each is worth more than if caught using standard seining and setnetting methods. Peter Pan Seafoods processes these fish.

A July 23, 2007, *Washington Post* article on the road ended with the point that opponents fear the cannery will truck salmon, crab and other products to and from the Cold Bay airport. Peter Pan manager Dale Schwarzmilller said there were no

plans to use the road but did not rule it out for the future. Using this road, the Aleut will be able to jet their seafood products directly to Seattle or Tokyo. And with the third longest runway in Alaska in Cold Bay, there is no limit to the size of the plane.

The Copper and Yukon river processors are nervous, and they should be. The highest quality fish are caught the farthest from their spawning grounds. While there are many terminal fisheries in the region, most Aleutia sockeye are hundreds of miles from their rivers of origin, and they rival Copper River reds in quality and taste.

New roads change villages. Not only will people have reliable access out of the community, but it also means it will be easier for people to come in. It has been documented throughout the Native north that most of these effects are negative. With a more reliable way to get their fish to market, this road might be the exception. **NF**

*Katherine Reedy-Maschner is an assistant professor of anthropology at Idaho State University.*

*E-mail Dock Talk submissions to [jfraser@divcom.com](mailto:jfraser@divcom.com), or fax them to (207) 842-5603. Submissions should be approximately 750 words and include daytime phone number and Social Security number. Authors published in Dock Talk receive \$150.*