

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Alaska's Land Exchange Bill Gets Hearing in U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Next Week**

#### **King Cove Residents Are Hopeful This Hearing Will Prepare the Way for a Lifeline to Cold Bay**

King Cove, AK – April 10, 2008 – Legislation proposing an unprecedented land exchange between the State of Alaska, the King Cove Corporation and the federal government is scheduled for a hearing in the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee at 2:30 p.m. (Eastern time) on Tuesday, April 15, 2008 (in room 366 of the Senate Dirksen Building). The Izembek Enhancement Act (S. 1680) proposes increasing the size of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge by more than 61,000 acres. Forty-five thousand acres would become new wilderness. In exchange, the State of Alaska would get a 206-acre easement for a 7-mile single-lane gravel road to connect the isolated community of King Cove to the Alaska's third largest airstrip, located 25 miles away in Cold Bay. The road would generally follow the routes of existing military roads within the refuge dating back to World War II during the Aleutians Campaign.

“Since 1980, the people of King Cove have been seeking a solution to this access problem,” said Ernest Weiss, King Cove Mayor. “It has caused a lot of heartache. When poor weather prevents travel by air or boat, transporting people out of the community for essential medical care is absolutely impossible. This legislation will solve that problem. At the same time, the federal government is gaining a tremendous amount of valuable wilderness land to add to the refuge. It's beneficial for everyone concerned.”

King Cove Corporation President Della Trumble says the land exchange legislation is a common sense solution to the perennial King Cove access problem.

“The land surrounding King Cove was designated as wilderness more than 25 years ago without considering how residents would be affected or even consulting the Aleut people who have lived here for thousands of years,” said Della Trumble, president of the King Cove Corporation. “Now we have an opportunity to turn that around. We need a road so we will have a safe, reliable

transportation option.” Trumble added, “This is about providing peace of mind and improving the quality of life for the residents who live here. We are so grateful that our voices will finally be heard.”

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, the hovercraft has been on operational hiatus (except for medevacs) since March 1, 2008. Between the beginning of the fiscal year (which began July 1, 2007) and the end of February 2008, the Borough incurred a hovercraft-related loss of \$832,000. Mechanical problems, delays in getting replacement parts from the United Kingdom and poor weather have combined to keep the hovercraft out of service much more than previously anticipated. The stand down will continue through April 12, 2008. When service resumes, hovercraft service will have been cut back from seven days a week to three. It is not clear that even this reduced service can be sustained, since the hovercraft is so expensive to operate. A permanent shutdown because of costs and operational issues remains a clear potential.

“We believe building a road to the City of Cold Bay through the Izembek Refuge is our only feasible, long-term solution,” said King Cove Mayor Weiss. “Our residents deserve the same quality of life that people elsewhere in the United States have. The Aleut people have always been good stewards of the land, and they will continue to do so.”

“We have come to Congress not just with a problem, but with a solution,” added Trumble. “We’re asking people to judge this legislation on its merits, and give us a chance to have a safe, dependable transportation option that will ultimately save lives.”

## **Background Information:**

Before the hovercraft was available, 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 Cold Bay, where an all-weather airport is located. Since 1979, eleven people have died in this flight corridor during questionable weather. 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 of this community 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, without consulting or informing the indigenous people. 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.

As part of legislation introduced in June 2007, members of the King Cove Corporation decided they would be willing to give up a large amount of their valuable land because this transportation access is so important to the community. The King Cove Corporation (created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) will relinquish more than 18,000 acres. The State of Alaska has brought nearly 43,000 acres to this land exchange. 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. 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).

Legislation proposing the unprecedented land exchange between the State of Alaska, the King Cove Corporation and the federal government received a hearing before the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee last October. The bill, H.R. 2801, 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 from King Cove, through Alaska's Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, to Cold Bay's all-weather airport, located about 25 miles away.

Support for the legislation has come from the local, state and national level. Borough Mayor Stanley Mack and King Cove Corporation President Della Trumble testified in favor of the bill at the hearing last fall. 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. "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 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 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."

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