



PRESS RELEASE

Contact:

Della Trumble
President, King Cove Corporation
(907) 497-2312; dellat@arctic.net

Gary Hennigh
King Cove City Manager
(907) 274-7555; cell: 350-1372
ghennighmgr@gci.net

King Cove and the State of Alaska Offer Huge Land Swap in Exchange for a Small Road Easement through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge

King Cove Residents Say This Would Be the Final Solution to the Access Problem

King Cove, AK – June 6, 2007 – The Alaska congressional delegation is expected to introduce a bill in Congress this week, authorizing an unprecedented land trade between the federal government, the State of Alaska and the King Cove Corporation. In exchange, King Cove residents would have access to a small road through Alaska’s Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. The bill would add 61,723 acres of key wildlife habitat to the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula Wildlife Refuges.

This significant land trade would provide critical habitat for birds, mammals and fish. Once enacted, the exchange would be the first new wilderness in Alaska designated by Congress in more than 25 years. The bill would designate 42,456 acres of that land as wilderness. The State of Alaska has brought nearly 43,000 acres to this land exchange. The King Cove Corporation (created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) is relinquishing more than 18,000 acres. In exchange, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) would transfer approximately 206 acres for a 100-foot to 150-foot wide road easement within the refuge without any cost to the federal government. The State of Alaska would foot the bill for the road construction. It would include a cable barrier on each side of the road and would prohibit off-road vehicles from accessing the refuge.

“This bill would allow thousands of acres of land to be added to the wilderness while enhancing the area,” said Ernest Weiss, mayor of King Cove.

“It’s a tremendous amount of land that we’re putting on the table,” said Della Trumble, president of the King Cove Corporation. “It’s tough when I think that we’re giving this land back to the government in order to have access to this road. That land represents who we are as a people.”

However, Trumble says if this is what they have to do to have a safe and reliable transportation route to Cold Bay, then it’s a price we are willing to pay.

The majority of residents living in King Cove are Aleut and the descendants of the indigenous people from this region. The Aleut have lived in this isolated area of the Alaska Peninsula for more than 4,000 years. Thirty-six years ago, the federal government designated a major portion of the land that lies between the two villages as wilderness. That action precluded the construction of a road between King Cove and Cold Bay, the closest village.

“This area was designated as wilderness without any consultation with the Native people who live here,” said Weiss. “This is absolutely a matter of respect for the Aleut people.”

The King Cove road issue first came before Congress nine years ago. In 1998, a road plan between King Cove and the all-weather Cold Bay airport, approximately 25 miles away, was rejected after conservation groups fought 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 road/marine transportation system link between the two cities. Although the clinic 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. Meanwhile, a 17-mile road was built from King Cove to the border of the Izembek Refuge. A multi-million dollar hovercraft was purchased to ferry residents to the Cold Bay airport. And although the residents appreciate the congressional appropriation, studies have shown the City of King Cove and the Aleutians East Borough cannot financially support a hovercraft over the short and long term.

“Without the hovercraft or the road, we would be back to square one with no access to Cold Bay during bad weather,” said Weiss.

“This time, the legislation offers an incredible amount of land to the federal government. It would hopefully resolve a problem that’s haunted us for so long and has caused us a lot of heartache,” said Trumble.

The Cold Bay airport was built in 1942 during World War II and is currently the third largest in Alaska. It has a 10,000-foot main runway and a 6,500-foot crosswind runway. The problem is King Cove’s topographic constraints and frequent inclement weather only allows residents to access Cold Bay 60 – 70 percent of the time. King Cove’s small gravel airstrip is nestled between several 3,000-foot volcanic peaks.

“The inability to get out of King Cove to access Anchorage’s major medical facilities during health emergencies is an uncontrollable and unfortunate situation for patients,” said Trumble.

Numerous fatalities from small plane crashes have occurred as a result of King Cove residents trying to reach Cold Bay’s airport during health emergencies when the weather was questionable. When stormy conditions or poor visibility prevented small planes from leaving the ground, residents have risked crossing the rough waters to Cold Bay by boat, a trip that takes about three hours.

“We had a situation where an elderly lady with a heart condition died at the dock in Cold Bay after being transported by boat from King Cove in bad weather,” said Trumble.

Depending on the size of the boat and the tides, passengers often have to climb 10 – 16 feet up an ice-encrusted vertical ladder to reach the dock one-quarter mile from shore in Cold Bay. Patients unable to make the climb are put on stretchers with ropes and hoisted onto the dock.

“It’s horrible for any patient with medical conditions to be offloaded in that manner,” said Trumble. “I had a sister-in-law who after going into premature labor, delivered her baby on the boat on the way to Cold Bay,” she said. “The baby was only three pounds. As they lifted the mother and the baby up, the IV cords got caught underneath the dock. They had to lower her, untangle the cords and bring her back up again,” she added.

“Without a solution to this problem, it’s only a matter of time before someone else dies,” said Weiss. “If this legislation saves just one life,” said Weiss, “it would be worth it.”

“We, as citizens of the United States, have the right to safe and reliable access just like everybody else in the Lower 48,” Trumble added. “We have been here for thousands of years, and we want to stay here. It’s our home.”

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