

An aerial photograph of a gravel road winding through a vast, snow-covered landscape. In the distance, a snowplow is visible, pushing snow to the side of the road. The background features a range of snow-capped mountains under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is desolate and emphasizes the isolation of the road.

THE ROAD TO *Nowhere*

Gravel Road Full of
Potholes for Wildlife
and Taxpayers

*A problem already solved
by Congress in 1998*

“This road would significantly harm global populations of migratory bird species and other wildlife at taxpayer expense”

An unnecessary road construction project threatens to devastate a globally significant wilderness area on a national wildlife refuge on the Alaskan peninsula. The Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-11) recently signed into law by President Obama, authorizes a multi-million dollar road carved through the heart of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, an area internationally recognized as biologically important. Although other transportation methods are readily available, road proponents argue this boondoggle is needed to connect the villages of King Cove and Cold Bay. Yet such a road would significantly harm geese, ducks, global populations of migratory bird species and other wildlife at taxpayer expense and set a precedent for other destructive practices in wilderness areas.

As written, this law does not authorize the road until the Secretary of the Interior has determined that the project is in the public interest. The Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges and the National Wildlife Refuge Association urge Secretary Salazar to stop this wasteful and harmful Road to Nowhere.

- **The Road to Nowhere is a Solution in Search of a Problem** — Congress already solved this problem; further debate of this boondoggle is a waste of time and taxpayer dollars. In 1998, King Cove residents argued they lacked adequate access to medical and airport facilities. In response, Congress allocated \$37.5 million for medical and airport improvements and a 98-foot hovercraft that has successfully provided rapid medical evacuations.
- **The Road to Nowhere is Bad for Wildlife** — Its construction would have devastating impacts on more than half a million



The 98-foot Suna-X Hovercraft Ferry has completed more than 30 successful medevacs between King Cove and Cold Bay. Based on historical weather data for the bay, the craft should be operational 99% of the time, whereas the proposed 30-mile gravel road through refuge wilderness would be dangerous and totally unreliable in drifting snow (see cover photo).

Pacific brant, emperor geese, swans and other wildlife, resulting in fragmentation, disturbance, and pollution.

- **The Road to Nowhere is Bad for Wilderness** — The road would be the first ever to bisect a congressionally-designated wilderness, where by definition, humans leave no mark. The precedent opens the door for other wilderness areas to be destroyed. Further, the principles established in the “National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997” would be reversed.
- **The Road to Nowhere is Not in the Public Interest** — This road would cost American taxpayers additional millions of dollars for building and maintenance costs. The 10.4 miles of road already constructed as part of the hovercraft initiative cost approximately \$26 million. At this pace, fully completing the road as proposed would cost in excess of \$55 million!

Retread — A Second Time Around

Citing concerns for public safety, the 800 residents of King Cove argue that this road is necessary for access to the airport located in the community of Cold Bay in case of medical emergencies. However, in 1998 Congress considered and denied a similar proposal for a road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), citing the significant anticipated impacts as noted in an Environmental Impact Statement. Instead, legislators appropriated \$37.5 million to fund a road-hovercraft link between the villages and improvements to the King Cove airstrip and clinic.

Of the \$37.5 million in federal funds, \$2.5 million was used to improve the King Cove Medical Clinic and \$9 million to purchase of the hovercraft, currently operating out of Lenard Harbor. The remaining \$26 million in American taxpayer dollars was spent to build 10.4 miles of a planned 17-mile, one-lane gravel road from the King Cove airstrip to a hovercraft pad adjacent to the refuge wilderness.

To date, the temporary hovercraft pad in Lenard Harbor, just a few miles from King Cove, has been the launch point for more than 30 suc-

cessful 20-minute medevacs to Cold Bay. In such cases, the ambulance drives aboard the 98-foot craft that travels up to 58 mph over water and land on a cushion of air. In the event of a medical emergency, the extra distance on a gravel road could have life or death consequences, particularly in winter when avalanches and high winds and drifting snow are commonplace. Driving the length of the proposed road would likely take nearly 2 hours even in optimal weather.

Despite the success of the hovercraft ferry, which has a 100% success record, and the exorbitant costs of a road without a clear purpose, King Cove is once again asking Congress to allow the previously denied 9 miles to be punched through the heart of the Izembek Refuge Wilderness.



Top: 98% of the Pacific brant population depend on the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge's eel grass beds for foraging; Above: The current hovercraft pad in Lenard Harbor, just a few miles from King Cove, has been the successful launch point for the hovercraft ferry, which travels up to 58 mph over water and land on a cushion of air and takes just 20 minutes to reach Cold Bay. Despite this success, King Cove has already wasted 26 million taxpayer dollars to move the pad to the refuge boundary, 17 miles down a perilous one-lane gravel road prone to avalanches and drifting snow.

Roadkill

Constructing a road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge would have numerous negative impacts on wildlife and would degrade the critical wetlands habitat and wilderness quality of the refuge. It would devastate the exceptional refuge habitat vital to over half a million migratory birds, as well as brown bear, caribou, red fox, sea otters, and other wildlife. Almost the entire population of emperor geese and 98% of the Pacific brant population, as well as threatened Steller's eiders and tundra swans, depend on the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge.

The isthmus where the road would be constructed is extremely narrow; standing in the center, one can easily see both the Izembek Lagoon to the north and the Kinzarof Lagoon to the south. Pacific brant gorge on the eelgrass beds of Izembek Lagoon before their non-stop journey to wintering grounds in Mexico. Birds and wildlife, such as brown bears, travel between the two lagoons, sometimes more than once a day, in search of food revealed by receding tides. Caribou use the isthmus as a wintering ground and a pathway when traveling to and from wintering grounds beyond the refuge. Brown bear make extensive use of the area for denning.

Road construction, traffic, and maintenance could cause irreversible harm to the eelgrass beds and wetlands vital to many migratory birds. Passing vehicles would flush birds, wasting their valuable energy as they try to build up enough strength and resources for their migration. A road through this isthmus would also disrupt wildlife movement and result in increased mortalities.

The very wilderness character of the refuge is at stake. By definition, wilderness is where humans leave no mark. This precedent could open the door for other destructive practices on wilderness areas.



Map of King Cove's proposed road through heart of the Izembek NWR.

NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELSEY, THE WASHINGTON POST



Narrow isthmus where proposed road would slice through the fragile refuge lands.

Quantity vs. Quality

The proposal offers a land exchange to sway the Administration and members of Congress. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) would receive more than 61,000 acres to add to the Izembek NWR and nearby Alaska Peninsula NWR, with over 43,000 of those acres designated as wilderness. In exchange, the state of Alaska would receive 206 acres of the Izembek refuge to build the road. However, these

206 acres are on the sensitive isthmus — the biological heart of the refuge — and the road construction would severely impact the birds and wildlife that depend on the refuge. The wetlands of Izembek National Wildlife Refuge are internationally recognized as globally significant. Izembek was recognized by the Reagan administration as the first site in the United States under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. Izembek is an “Important Bird Area” of global significance, as identified by Audubon and BirdLife International, and is a sister refuge to Russia’s Kronotskiy State Biosphere Reserve through a U.S.-Russian Governmental Agreement on Cooperation in Environmental Protection.

Merely comparing numbers of acres overlooks the fact that the lands proposed in the exchange hold vastly different values. Most of the lands offered in exchange are uplands with little wildlife habitat value. The offered lands that do have biological value are currently under no threat of development, so adding them to Izembek refuge is not nearly as important as protecting the 206 acres on the isthmus. The proposed land exchange would not come close to compensating for the irreversible impact to wildlife and wetlands.

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Dollars and Sense

Most of the route for the proposed road is through fragile rolling tundra dotted with wetlands and prone to high snowdrifts. The rest of the route crosses areas of steep slopes and unstable volcanic soils prone to avalanches. Gravel is scarce in remote areas of Alaska and must be shipped in. \$26 million has been spent constructing 10 miles of the 17.6 mile road connecting King Cove Airport to a hovercraft terminal adjacent to the refuge. At this rate, completing this road, and the 9-mile stretch of road through the Wilderness Area will cost at least \$30 million. This does not include costs for continuing work on the currently impassible 7 miles of road from Cold Bay, nor does it include installation of double cable barriers through the proposed route through the wilderness, which according to the Washington State Department of Transportation cost an estimated additional \$44,000 per mile, with an additional \$2,000 - \$5,000 per mile in annual maintenance. Thus, the total cost of this unnecessary and dangerous road will likely exceed 56 million in American taxpayer dollars.

Above: Tundra swans breed and nest on the tundra in wilderness havens, including the Izembek NWR. Inset: The village of Cold Bay struggles to keep a 3-mile road out of town passable during winter. The proposed road through Izembek NWR would be impassible much of the year and require high maintenance costs as opposed to the more efficient hovercraft ferry already in use.

Caution: Danger Ahead

Frequent snowstorms, avalanches, and extreme high tides, coupled with winds exceeding 100 mph, would pose serious threats on this rugged road. Even when conditions allowed for travel, the journey would be dangerous. The claim that a road would improve health and safety totally ignores statistics from other parts of Alaska that show remarkably high rates of road accident fatalities due to inclement weather and hazardous road conditions. According to the Alaska Department of Transportation, motor vehicle accidents cost Alaska \$475 million dollars in the year 2000 alone. The proposed road could actually increase dangers and travel time, thereby posing additional health risks to King Cove residents, contrary to the road’s stated purpose.

Medevacs on a Cushion of Air

Since late 2006, medevacs and other transportation from King Cove to Cold Bay have been made possible by the magnificent Suna-X hovercraft ferry. At 98 feet long and 50 feet wide, it can carry 50 passengers and 22 tons of freight, including cars, trucks and an ambulance in case of emergency. The trip across Cold Bay takes only 20 minutes, reaching a top speed of 58 mph. It is also capable of operating in high winds and waves up to 10 feet high. More than 30 successful medevacs since September 2006 have resulted in all passengers quickly and safely reaching the Cold Bay airport. To date, the Suna-X has transported over 1,090 passengers, 110 vehicles, and 110,000 pounds of freight. Expected revenue for the hovercraft in 2009 exceeds \$800,000. This, along with the promised \$460,000 annual subsidy from the East Aleutians Borough, will exceed the anticipated 2009 operating costs for the hovercraft by over \$150,000.

Problem Solved

The Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges and the National Wildlife Refuge Association call upon Secretary Salazar to reject the Road to Nowhere. Congress successfully addressed King Cove's health care and medevac needs in 1998

The massive Suna-X hovercraft is 98 feet long and 50 feet wide and can carry 50 passengers and 22 tons of freight.



KVICHAK MARINE INDUSTRIES.

with the addition of a hovercraft for medical transports as well as improvements to their medical clinic. Taxpayers and wildlife should not bear the burden of the additional costs and new problems created by revisiting issues that have already been resolved.

The Friends of Alaska NWRs

Educate the public and decision makers on local, national, and international levels about Alaska's National Wildlife Refuges.

Assist the refuges in accomplishing their missions through wildlife management and habitat improvement projects.

Fund refuge-oriented projects through grants, memberships, donations, and other activities.

www.alaskarefugefriends.org

The National Wildlife Refuge Association

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association is to conserve America's wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries that secure its ecological integrity.

www.refugeassociation.org



Nurturing refuges beyond our own time

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