

State of Alaska Testimony on HR 2801 – the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula  
Refuge and Wilderness Enhancement Act and King Cove Safe Access Act

Before the House Committee on Natural Resources  
October 31, 2007

Presented by Mr. Dick Mylius, Director, Alaska Department of Natural  
Resources Division of Mining, Land and Water

Good Afternoon Chairman Rahall, Ranking Member Congressman Young,  
and Members of the Committee on Natural Resources.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon in support of  
HR 2801, legislation that would authorize a land exchange between the State  
of Alaska, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and King Cove Corporation to  
secure road access between the Alaskan communities of King Cove and  
Cold Bay. These communities are located on the Alaska Peninsula and are  
accessible only by air or water.

A short overland link between these communities would provide residents of  
King Cove with safe, dependable, and economic all weather access to the  
airport at Cold Bay. The need for this road link has been identified in land  
and transportation plans for at least twenty five years. Most recently it was  
included in the Alaska Department of Transportation's Southwest Alaska  
Transportation Plan, adopted in 2004.

This overland link is necessary because both air and water access to King  
Cove is treacherous in the frequent stormy weather so common on the lower  
Alaska Peninsula. Cold Bay has a much larger, safer airport and the  
residents of King Cove need better access to that facility for health and  
safety, including emergency medical evacuations. A combination road and  
hovercraft system, established under the King Cove Health and Safety Act  
passed by Congress several years ago, has not safely nor efficiently resolved  
access problems.

The land exchange that is before you today is the result of numerous  
meetings between the Alaska Regional Office of the US Fish and Wildlife  
Service, the City of King Cove, the Aleutians East Borough, King Cove  
Native Corporation, and the State of Alaska.

The land exchange would add valuable and significant acreage to the  
Izembek and Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuges. Much of the land

that would be added to the refuges is currently owned by the State of Alaska. Specifically, the State of Alaska is offering to exchange 43,093 acres, or all of the state owned land contained in Township 53 South, Range 85 West, Seward Meridian and Township 54 South, Range 85 West, Seward Meridian in exchange for an easement dedicated to the State of Alaska, through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness.

This undeveloped state land is surrounded on three sides by existing refuge lands and is habitat for brown bears and caribou. This state land includes the lower portion of the Cathedral River, which drains the western flanks of Pavlof Volcano, one of the most active volcanoes in North America. It is de facto wilderness land. This state land was included in a recent state oil and gas lease sale, although no bids were received on these tracts.

The land being offered to the Izembek Refuge by King Cove Corporation includes valuable waterfowl habitat that straddles Kinzarof Lagoon at the head of Cold Bay. This land is an inholding within the existing Izembek Wilderness area, and would become part of that wilderness area through this legislation.

The road easement that the state would acquire will run approximately 13.3 miles through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. More than half of this 13.3 mile road already exists today as primitive roads that were originally built during World War II. Of the 13 miles, only 8.9 miles is within Refuge Wilderness, and of that, 2.6 miles is an existing unimproved road that was built prior to Wilderness designation. The total length of new road through the Wilderness area is only 6.3 miles.

The proposed road begins on the northeast side of Cold Bay, near the hovercraft terminal, and terminates on the southern boundary of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge where it adjoins a state owned road leading into Cold Bay. The exact location of the easement will be determined in consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

The combined offers from the State of Alaska and the King Cove Corporation would significantly increase the size of the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuges. Specifically, the exchange will result in an increase of approximately 51,000 acres of Refuge lands, 43,093 acres contributed by the state and 7,900 contributed by the King Cove Corporation. All of the state land that is being offered in this exchange would be designated Wilderness by this legislation.

The state would acquire approximately 206 acres that encompass the road. The state would also acquire an additional 1,600 acres of federal land on Sitkinak Island. The 1,600 acre parcel of federal land on Sitkinak Island is a former Coast Guard station that is a federal inholding on the predominantly state-owned island. Sitkinak Island is located south of Kodiak Island and is used primarily for cattle grazing.

The State of Alaska recognizes the unique value of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. In 1972, the Alaska Legislature set aside the state-owned tidelands within Izembek Lagoon and adjacent offshore state lands as a State Game Refuge. These state lands contain eel grass beds that are the very heart of Izembek Refuge.

As part of this proposal, the state is offering to add more than 4,000 acres of state-owned tidelands in Kinzarof Lagoon, at the head of Cold Bay, to the State Game Refuge.

The exchange will require approval by our state legislature as the state lands are quite likely of unequal, but greater, fair market value than the federal lands being exchanged.

The state is well aware of concerns expressed by various groups who are opposed to this legislation. Some are concerned about the precedent set by building a road through a Wilderness Area. Yet, when the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act was passed in 1980, Congress specifically recognized that transportation facilities may be needed across the 58 million acres of Federal Wilderness lands in Alaska. The Alaska Lands Act requires Congressional approval for such transportation corridors through Wilderness, which is why we are before this committee today.

There are also concerns about increased public access to the refuge wilderness. The refuge and wilderness area are already accessible from Cold Bay by existing local roads. Through planning and enforcement of existing refuge regulations, the impacts of the limited number of new users from King Cove can be mitigated.

The State of Alaska supports this legislation and stands ready to commit over 43,000 acres of state land to the National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness system. We urge the Committee to approve this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about this legislation.