

# US approves land exchange for road through Alaska refuge

January 22 2018, by Dan Joling

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In this Sept. 23, 2013, file photo, a driver passes a small boat harbor in King Cove, Alaska. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke signed a land exchange agreement Monday, Jan. 22, 2018, authorizing a swap of federal land in Izembek National Wildlife Refuge for land owned by King Cove Corporation that could lead to a road through the refuge so King Cove residents can have land access to an all-weather airport at Cold Bay, Alaska. (James Brooks/Kodiak Daily Mirror via AP, File)

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke signed a land trade agreement Monday

that could lead to construction of a road through a national wildlife refuge in Alaska, portraying the exchange as a people-versus-wildlife issue.

Environmental groups have said they will fight to keep a road out of Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and its internationally recognized habitat for migrating waterfowl.

Surrounded by Alaska officials in Washington, D.C., Zinke signed the agreement swapping up to 0.8 square miles (2 square kilometers) of federal refuge for lands of equal value owned by King Cove Native Corp.

King Cove, a fishing community of about 900 people sandwiched between ocean and mountains, wants the road for land access to an all-weather airport at the community of Cold Bay.

King Cove, Cold Bay and the Izembek refuge are near the tip of the Alaska Peninsula, the body of land in Alaska's southwest corner that juts toward the Aleutian Islands.

Strong winds and the challenging King Cove area landscape frequently prompt flight cancellations. Residents for decades have sought a road link to Cold Bay, the site of an airport built during World War II that features one of Alaska's longest runways.

"It's more than just a road," Zinke said at the signing event. "It's an idea and value that people really do matter."

Zinke said the 12-mile (19-kilometer) section of the road through the refuge would cause no harm to wildlife but would make a difference to children or mothers who need to get to a hospital. He said the road is a priority for President Donald Trump.

"The president want to make sure the people's voice is heard," he said

Supporters say a one-lane, gravel road would carry medical patients and private traffic but would be closed to commercial uses such as transporting fish.

Congress in 1997 addressed the King Cove transportation issue with a \$37.5 million appropriation for water access to Cold Bay that included a \$9 million hovercraft. The Aleutians East Borough, the regional governing body, took the vessel out of service after deciding it was too expensive and unreliable to operate.

A road would split an isthmus as narrow as 3 miles (4.8 kilometers) wide. The isthmus is the southern border of the 150-square-mile (390-square kilometer) Izembek Lagoon, holding one of the world's largest beds of eelgrass, a rich food source for Pacific brant geese, endangered Steller's eider sea ducks and other migratory birds.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2013 concluded that a road through the isthmus could cause irrevocable damage to the watershed. Former Interior Secretary Sally Jewell agreed with a Fish and Wildlife analysis that found a land exchange could not compensate for the special qualities of existing wildlife refuge lands.

"You can't make a fair trade for this kind of wilderness, because there's nothing else like it," said Randi Spivak, public lands program director at the Center for Biological Diversity, in a statement. "This land swap violates the purpose of the refuge. It will devastate wildlife and destroy congressionally designated wilderness."

Spivak said King Cove residents have other, safer options for emergency flights.

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