

**Alaska Wilderness League * Animal Welfare Institute * Blue Goose Alliance
Braided River * Cascadia Wildlands * Center for Biological Diversity
Defenders of Wildlife * Environmental Protection Information Center * Earthjustice
Environment America * Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges
Klamath Forest Alliance * League of Conservation Voters * National Audubon Society
National Wildlife Refuge Association * Northcoast Environmental Center * Sierra Club
San Juan Citizens Alliance * Southwest Environmental Center * The Wilderness Society
Trustees for Alaska * Turtle Island Restoration Network * WildEarth Guardians
Wilderness Watch * Wildlands Network**

June 22, 2017

Protect Our Public Wildlands: Oppose H.R. 218

Dear Representative:

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters nationwide, we strongly urge you to oppose H.R. 218, the “King Cove Road Land Exchange Act,” which would remove the biological heart of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge from federal public ownership to construct a destructive road through the refuge. This harmful bill would cause irreparable damage to a globally important conservation area, threaten the survival of imperiled species and undermine fundamental environmental laws. It would set a precedent that jeopardizes wildlife refuges and wilderness protections on public lands across the country. We recommend a NO vote on H.R. 218 when the legislation is marked up in the House Natural Resources Committee on June 27, 2017.

H.R. 218 would give away vital wildlands in the Izembek Refuge to the state of Alaska in exchange for comparatively low-quality state lands to make way for an unnecessary, costly, high maintenance, ecologically detrimental road. Izembek is an internationally recognized wetland and preserves coastal habitat for iconic wildlife, including brown bears, caribou, salmon, and hundreds of species of migratory birds. One of America’s most unique and ecologically significant wildlife refuges, this extraordinary landscape is almost entirely designated wilderness. The road would plow through a fragile wildlife corridor, causing irreversible harm to the vulnerable species and habitat Izembek was established to protect. Moreover, proponents’ statements indicate that commercial interests are a driving force behind the road proposal.

H.R. 218 would subvert multiple environmental laws to strip these vital wildlands out of Izembek, undermining the integrity of the National Wildlife Refuge System and the National Wilderness Preservation System. Legislating development that is incompatible with wildlife conservation in a refuge would circumvent core mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act that Congress enacted to ensure the Refuge System is preserved for future generations. De-designating wilderness to force through the destructive road would also violate the very purpose of the Wilderness Act to permanently protect public wildlands. The legislation additionally waives the National Environmental Policy Act to prevent public review of the road proposal. With a refuge in every state and territory and more than 109 million acres

of wilderness across the country, H.R. 218 creates dangerous national policy implications for wild places throughout the United States.

Passage of H.R. 218 would also play into the hands of special interests who seek to dismantle our public lands, setting a dangerous political precedent. A fringe social and political movement to divest the federal estate has given rise to repeated attempts to sell off and sell out our public trust resources for states and industry to plunder. The Refuge System has become a particular target of this extreme agenda. Legislation that voids federal protections for some of the most important wetlands on the planet and transfers them to the state of Alaska could fuel destructive efforts to eliminate protections for national wildlife refuges, wilderness areas and other public lands nationwide.

Moreover, the Izembek road controversy was already addressed by Congress in 1998 when the federal government provided substantial funding to provide for King Cove's medical needs—and end this decades-long dispute. The federal government allocated over \$37 million to upgrade access to quality medical care for the community in lieu of building the environmentally destructive road. In fact, American taxpayers have now spent more than \$50 million improving medical access in support of that commitment, yet demands for the damaging road persist.

The Department of the Interior has studied this issue exhaustively, and repeatedly concluded that the road should not be constructed. In 2013, after a comprehensive four-year analysis including consideration of more than 70,000 public comments, former Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell reaffirmed that a road through Izembek would irrevocably damage natural resources and should be rejected. In 2015, the U.S. District Court of Alaska upheld the Secretary's decision to protect the refuge. Most recently, the Army Corps of Engineers conducted a study to evaluate additional non-road transportation alternatives for King Cove and concluded that other viable options exist.

Diverse voices have consistently opposed this ill-advised road. The Association of Village Council Presidents, representing 56 Native villages in western Alaska, formally opposed the road due to the devastating impact it would have on subsistence resources. The former U.S. Indian Health Service medical director for King Cove stated that, during severe winter storms, “any attempt to travel the proposed road will be foolish beyond any reason...and would clearly jeopardize life,” due to ice and avalanche conditions. The taxpayer organization Citizens Against Government Waste has profiled the proposed road as a fiscal boondoggle. Former Department of the Interior officials from the Bush, Clinton, Ford, and Nixon Administrations have also stated that the road has long been a “terrible idea” and remains so today.

Any solutions that Congress considers to address King Cove's medical needs must not undermine the continued preservation of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge or the bedrock environmental laws protecting our public lands. We strongly urge you to uphold our country's conservation legacy by rejecting H.R. 218.

Sincerely,

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