

Road Threatens Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Again

Background:

The debate on the proposed road has been a heated one for 20 years now. Under ANILCA in 1980, 95% of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge was designated as wilderness -- such a designation comes with some very stringent protections. Even before the 90's, the Fish and Wildlife Service developed its argument against a road in the 1985 Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan. The road would pass along a thin isthmus between 2 lagoons that are the feeding ground of the Pacific black brant and a variety of other rare or threatened waterfowl. Suffice it to say that the road would go through one of the most important wildlife areas on the refuge that is in the designated wilderness.

In 1995 the Aleutians East Borough approached the AK congressional delegation for special legislation to grant a road right of way through the refuge. Their main argument was that it was a safety issue. King Cove says a road is necessary to assure safe transport in case of emergencies. The community of King Cove (pop. 800) wants a road to Cold Bay which has a long air strip and commercial flights. The road proposal sent the road through designated wilderness. It became a major national issue because the road was not compatible with wilderness area legislation. The issue was seen as a threat to wilderness areas everywhere and environmental groups all around the country expressed their opposition to the road. In the Clinton administration the Fish and Wildlife Service opposed the project.

Congress rejected the road through wilderness and thought they solved the problem in 1998 with a compromise bill called the King Cove Health and Safety Act. Congress appropriated \$37 million to improve community medical facilities, build a connecting road to a new marine terminal, and purchase a \$9 million hovercraft (which has performed more than 30 successful medical evacuations). However, a 2001 EIS by the Army Corps of Engineers presented transportation options that again considered the road as one of 5 options. About 13,000 comments were submitted with the majority being opposed to the road.

In March 2009, President Obama signed the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009. It included many projects that conservation groups had long wanted and supported. But in the Act was language that would allow wilderness lands at Izembek to be removed from federal protection by a 3 way land exchange with the State of Alaska and King Cove. The land exchange would effectively remove the wilderness restrictions that prohibited road construction in the first go round. Conservation groups have opposed discussion of a land exchange in the refuge in the past and in 1997 a land exchange offer from the King Cove Corporation was refused by the Fish and Wildlife Service. The land exchange is essentially an end run around wilderness protection. The Omnibus bill directs the Fish and Wildlife Service to prepare an EIS to evaluate the impacts of a land exchange and subsequent development of a road.

The Public Process:

The US Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking scoping comments on the EIS for Izembek Land Exchange and Road Corridor. The EIS is available for public review and comment. **Comments are due on April 30th.** To find out more about sending comments:

<http://izembek.fws.gov/eis.htm>

The purpose of the EIS is to evaluate a three-party land exchange that would add 56,393 of less valuable acres to the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuges (NWR), designate 43,000 acres as wilderness, transfer 1,600 acres of refuge lands on Sitkinak Island to the State of Alaska, and transfer a 206-acre, 9-mile corridor through Izembek NWR and designated Wilderness to the State, to allow a road to be constructed between the communities of King Cove and Cold Bay.