



Opening Statement: King Cove Hearing
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
April 14, 2016

Good morning, everyone. The Committee will come to order so that we can consider an issue that deserves to be at the very top of our legislative agenda: protecting the health and safety of the people of King Cove, Alaska.

For those who are not familiar with King Cove, it is an isolated fishing community located 625 miles southwest of Anchorage, near the end of the Alaska Peninsula. Eighty-five percent of its residents are Alaska Native, including many who are Aleut and members of the federally recognized Agdaagux [Ah-Ga-Dowough] tribe. As with so many of our rural communities, it can only be reached by boat or by plane.

King Cove is a beautiful place, but it is also located in the midst of some very difficult terrain. The community is nestled on a small spit that is surrounded by the ocean and volcanic mountains. The region is prone to high winds, low clouds, dense fog, and other conditions that can make both flying and boating extremely dangerous. The small planes that can land at King Cove's gravel airstrip regularly grapple with low visibility, strong turbulence, and gale-force crosswinds. If you are on the sea, mariners can be looking at 12-foot high seas.

Most of the time, local residents have no desire to travel when weather conditions are severe. Yet, there are also times when travel cannot be avoided. When a medical emergency occurs, there is no choice but to try to reach safety and care. There is a clinic in King Cove—and they do a phenomenal job—but there are certain things that you cannot do in a clinic. You don't have an anesthesiologist anywhere in the region. And so if you are a trauma victim, if you are a woman in early stages of labor, if you have a major illness, the clinic is not where you can receive your care.

So what do you do? The first step is to transport those who are sick, injured, or in need of other medical care to the community of Cold Bay. You say well wait a minute; you just said transport them to Anchorage. Well Anchorage is 625 miles away. The way to get them to safety is to take them to Cold Bay where there is a 10,000+ foot runway; the second longest runway in the state of Alaska is located just across the bay.

This is not only a runway that is accessible with better weather conditions, when I say that the weather is down in King Cove it is down over one third of the year. Over 100 days a year the King Cove airport is not accessible. Not that it is just bad weather—it's not accessible. On the alternative, in Cold Bay it is

around 10 days a year that that airport is shutdown. So this is dramatically different in terms of its accesses.

Since the 1940s, the Alaska Native people of King Cove have sought a reliable route to reach Cold Bay during medical emergencies. Cold Bay is a community that came about in WWII as that airport, basically, for air traffic in and out as we accessed the Aleutians. It was literally built for its airport. Today there are less than 100 people that live in Cold Bay; they are mostly federal or state employees. In the community of King Cove, a community of close to 1000 people, this is a community that has been there for maybe 4,000 years or so. This is where the native people have been for millennia.

So again as we are searching for those avenues to provide for a safe route to medical care, the answer is not to build a longer runway or a new airport near King Cove – you will still be faced with the geography around you--and the weather around you. A longer runway would simply expose both pilots and passengers to some of the worst flying conditions in the country.

The answer is not to buy a large ferry and construct new docks in both King Cove and Cold Bay – because it is not appropriate to expect injured patients and their doctors to suffer through a multi-hour trip in extremely rough seas or perhaps be shut out by the ice that comes into the bay.

The answer is not a new helicopter, which would be too dangerous to fly in most conditions and too expensive for such a small community to support.

The answer is not a hovercraft. That has been tried – and failed – because it could not operate when it was needed most, when the weather was most foul, and cost too much to maintain.

The answer is not the U.S. Coast Guard, either. As much as we love and support our Coast Guard, being an emergency medevac to a community is not part of their overall mission, although they will come when called. And they have. You will hear testimony to that fact. That we continue to have our Coast Guard men and women put their lives on the line, and do so willingly, but these rescues are not part of their core mission, they are not safe for anyone, and they are enormously expensive for U.S. taxpayers. It is estimated that one of these medevacs \$250,000—that is not an efficient use of taxpayer dollars.

The right answer is to do what virtually every other community in America would do. And that's to build a life-saving road—a connector road. In this case, it is to build an 11-mile, gravel, one-lane road that is reserved only for non-commercial use road. To connect the existing road from King Cove through the Izembek area and to the connector road that allows access into Cold Bay. We already have about 19 miles of existing roads that have been built outside of King Cove and Cold Bay.

Now you might say and you will hear that the area within the Refuge is untrammeled wilderness. It may have been untrammeled wilderness before WWII, but during the war there were roads built. There are over 50 miles of roads contained within the Refuge area. Currently. You might ask, well are those roads being used at all? Well they are being used by our Fish and Wildlife folks. They are being used by hunters.

Anyone listening must be wondering: why haven't Alaskans just built the road, already? And the reason is that we cannot get permission from our own federal government to do so, because this life-saving road

would cross a small corner of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge that is designated as federal wilderness. I will tell you that Congress routinely allows “cherry-stem” road, effectively to allow for a transit to move through these wilderness areas. The only difference here is that the cherry-stemming would cure an injustice, rather than prevent one as we try to do when we designate wilderness.

We have within this committee passed legislation, overwhelmingly approved by Congress, and that President Obama signed into law in 2009, the Department of the Interior recently had the ability to approve a road for King Cove. It was an admittedly lopsided deal: Alaskans offered a 300-to-1 land exchange in the federal government’s favor, asking for just 206 acres for a road corridor in exchange for 61,000 acres of our state lands and native lands.

Against all odds, Secretary Jewell rejected that offer on the day before Christmas Eve in 2013. She decided that using just 0.07 percent of the refuge as a “cherry stem” to help save the lives of the people who live there, while simultaneously expanding the refuge by tens of thousands of acres, was somehow not worth it. It just wasn’t worth it she said. And she came out with me to King Cove and she listened to the people of King Cove. I heard the exchanges back and forth, what the people said to her. I heard what the children said to her at the school assembly, when they told her that they were frightened to fly because their auntie had died, or their grandmother had died, or they had a neighbor who had been in a crash. And the Secretary stated that she had listened to the stories, but that she also needed to listen to the animals.

And that is what drives me with this, because we have a responsibility to the people that we represent. And we have a responsibility for the land as well and we don’t take that lightly. But think about the people that live out there. You will hear testimony from Stanley Mack and Della Trumble, whose families have lived out there forever. You ask them about how they care for the land, how they care for the animals, how they have been stewards, as the Aleut people, of these lands. I am not too worried that the animals will be taken care of, because I know that the Native people have done that for generations.

The other irony here is this decision was made despite the fact that dozens of miles of roads were built in the refuge area during World War II, with no lasting impacts on any species that lives there.

If that decision was made to protect the birds, it is a little ironic that the Fish and Wildlife Service’s website boasts about the recreational hunting for the waterfowl that is in the area. And the black brant, that we are supposedly protecting, are available for hunting. It is one of those issues that you look at and there are so many ironies.

That decision was made despite the fact that there are already countless roads in refuges across the country: as the State of Alaska has pointed out, there are roads in refuges in Florida, Maryland, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, Arizona, Montana, Missouri, Illinois, New Mexico, Nevada, and Washington state.

Interior’s decision ignored the fact that human lives have been lost in King Cove – with a total of 19 dead since 1980, either in plane crashes or because the sick and injured could not reach the help they so desperately needed in time.

Interior's decision was cynical. It was callous. It devastated the people of King Cove, who believed that help was finally on the way. It shattered the trust responsibility that the federal government is supposed to have to our nation's Native peoples. And it has left the people of King Cove in the same situation they have been in for decades: at the mercy of the elements, left to suffer needless pain, and perhaps even death, should they ever have a medical emergency.

King Cove has now endured a total of 42 medevacs since December 2013. The U.S. Coast Guard has carried out 16 of those medevacs, risking their own crews to rescue others. The patients have suffered terrible pain and trauma, including a man who dislocated both hips when a 600-pound crab pot fell on him; elderly residents suffering from internal bleeding or sepsis or apparent heart attacks; and an infant boy who was struggling to breathe.

We are holding this hearing because it is time to ensure that King Cove finally has reliable access to emergency medical transportation – something that virtually every other American takes for granted, without ever stopping to think about how important and valuable it is.

And I will remind people, that King Cove is a long ways away. Most people in this country will never have an opportunity to get there. But as remote as they are and as far away they are and as small as this community is, it is still an American community. And they are not asking for much.

This is an opportunity to hear directly from those in need – to let them make their case, in their own words, to those who hold the power to help them. And while we will be respectful of every viewpoint expressed today, it is clear: the best answer, the only answer, and the answer that should have been chosen a long time ago is a life-saving road.

This issue has gone on for decades, yet it might be new to some colleagues here. I thank you for listening and for your concern. I think you would share my concern that if people in your states were faced with an issue such as this, where there was an alternative. You will hear the arguments: “Well Alaska is difficult and there is weather all over; and stuff happens. And so because it happens in other places that King Cove should be no different.” But the difference with King Cove is that there is an answer that lies eleven miles away—the second longest runway in the state of Alaska. And they can get there if they have an eleven mile connector road. That is the difference between the situation in King Cove and some of the other places.

I am not going to sit back and hope that we do not have any emergencies in bad weather, because hope is not a policy. I am going to make sure that the people of King Cove are heard. So again, I thank you for enduring my longer opening statement, but as you can tell when it comes to helping protect human lives and preventing needless human suffering, I am going to do what I can.

With that I am going to ask my colleague Senator Cantwell to make her comments. I appreciate her being here this morning.

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