

**Statement for the Record**  
**U.S. Department of the Interior**  
**Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**  
**S. 3204, King Cove Land Exchange Act**  
**September 22, 2016**

Thank you for providing the Department of the Interior (Department) with the opportunity to present this Statement for the Record on S. 3204, the King Cove Land Exchange Act. The Department strongly opposes S. 3204, which would irreversibly damage a critically important and intact, internationally significant wetland area in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) that is part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The Refuge, established in the 1960s, encompasses lands designated as Wilderness by Congress in the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). In the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-11, Title VI, Subtitle E) (Act), Congress authorized the Secretary of the Interior to exchange lands within the Refuge for lands owned by the State of Alaska and the King Cove Corporation for the purpose of constructing a single lane gravel road between the communities of King Cove and Cold Bay, Alaska, if it is in the public interest. As directed by Congress in the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, Secretary Jewell conducted an analysis of the proposed land exchange that took almost four years to complete.

The nearly four-year analysis on the effects of the proposed land exchange, including the impact a road would have on the Refuge's vital ecology and Congressionally-designated wilderness, culminated in a 2013 environmental impact statement (EIS) that helped inform the Secretary's decision. To complete the EIS, the Service conducted a public process that included over 130 meetings with stakeholders, government-to-government consultations, and numerous trips to King Cove by Service and Department officials. The decision made based on the 2013 EIS does not preclude the State of Alaska, the Aleutians East Borough, or the communities of King Cove and Cold Bay from implementing marine or air alternatives for transportation improvements to improve medical access outside of the Refuge.

The Department recognizes the concerns of King Cove residents about access to health care. Congress recognized these same concerns in fiscal year 1999 when they appropriated funds (\$37 million) to improve King Cove's medical clinic and airport, and to purchase a hovercraft to provide transportation between King Cove and Cold Bay. The \$6.0 million hovercraft was in operation from 2007 to 2010 and it successfully completed every requested medical evacuation. The Committee language directs an all-weather year-round transportation route for the residents of King Cove, but the proposed road would not provide consistent access due to blowing and drifting snow, and avalanche risk.

Given the concerns raised by King Cove residents, the Department remains committed to assisting in identifying and evaluating options to improve access to affordable transportation and health care for the citizens of this remote Alaska community.

Izembek Refuge is a globally significant area, designated as a Globally Important Bird Area by the American Bird Conservancy and designated a Wetland of International Importance under the RAMSAR convention, one of only 19 such sites in the United States. The Refuge serves as vital habitat for shorebirds and waterfowl – including 98 percent of the world’s population of Pacific black brant – as well as brown bear, caribou, and salmon. These species are important subsistence resources for Native Alaskans. A road would permanently bisect the isthmus, where most of the Refuge’s 300,000 acres of Congressionally-designated wilderness are located. By designating this area as Wilderness in 1980, the most protective category of public lands, Congress recognized the need to protect the Refuge as a place where natural processes prevail with few signs of human presence.

At the core of the areas protected are internationally significant eelgrass beds in Izembek and Kinzarof lagoons, as well as adjacent wetlands and uplands of the narrow isthmus. In addition to the brant, other species that depend on these wetlands and eelgrass beds include emperor geese, Steller’s eiders, and hundreds of thousands of other federally-protected waterfowl and shorebirds.

The effect of the bill would be to require the Department to enter into an equal-value (monetary) exchange of lands that would not provide the lands originally offered by King Cove and the State of Alaska. The Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Land Exchange/Road Corridor Final Environmental Impact Statement evaluated a proposed land exchange that would have brought many more acres of land into the Refuge System (roughly 300 times more), yet the Department’s analysis indicated the larger acreage could not adequately compensate or mitigate for the impact to unique values of existing refuge lands, nor the anticipated effects that the proposed road would have on wildlife, habitat, subsistence resources, and wilderness values of the Refuge that would have resulted had that exchange gone forward. Moreover, the proposed route for this new road would extend the Northeast Terminal Road that connects King Cove to the new hovercraft pad location into the Wilderness area of the refuge. The Northeast Terminal Road currently ends near the Wilderness boundary. The Service has observed all-terrain vehicle (ATV) tracks off the road to the Northeast Terminal onto undeveloped private land since it was built, and a corresponding increase in habitat degradation and wildlife disturbance. The Department is concerned that extending this road through the Wilderness area will lead to similar ATV traffic into Refuge land and the associated habitat damage and wildlife disturbance.

The Izembek Refuge and its Wilderness were established to protect some of the most unique and important wetlands in the world, and running a road through those sensitive areas will have lasting consequences for Alaska’s wildlife. We will continue to work with the State of Alaska and local communities to support viable alternatives to ensure the continued health and safety of King Cove residents.