

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES



SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL, *Ranking Member*

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Opening Statement Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) Hearing on King Cove, Alaska April 14, 2016

“Well thank you, Madam Chair, and I welcome the witnesses here today including your Lieutenant Governor and many of the people I’ve seen in Alaska. My best wishes to the Governor of Alaska and I want to thank him for this sweatshirt from Cantwell, Alaska, which I mentioned I want to visit someday. So thank you so much for that.

“I know this question is something the chairman has felt strongly about, and I know this issue has been debated for many years, and it is the subject of longstanding concern. That’s why so many of you are here today.

“Over the years, a number of options have been proposed for addressing the health and safety of King Cove’s population. The chairwoman mentioned including a hovercraft or providing new marine transport, such as an aluminum landing craft or passenger ferry; upgrading the medical clinics; and upgrading the airstrip or providing a heliport. And, of course, most of the attention has been focused on building a road through the National Wildlife Refuge.

“Some of these proposals have received federal funding, including \$37.5 million that was appropriated in 1999 for a number of upgrades, including: a hovercraft, which has been discontinued; road construction from King Cove to a new dock facility; improvements to the airstrip; and significant upgrades to the medical clinic.

“All of the transportation options have drawbacks, and all involve significant funding requirements. I think the record is clear that there are no simple solutions here for addressing the real issues at King Cove.

“So when a land exchange in the National Wildlife Refuge was first proposed several years ago as a means of allowing road construction through the refuge, there was a considerable debate about the relative environmental importance of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and the effect the road would have on the wildlife population and the wilderness character of the area.

“In an effort to better understand this significance and potential effects of a road, Congress in the 2009 Omnibus Public Lands Bill authorized the Secretary of the Interior to enter into a land exchange that would have allowed for construction of a non-commercial gravel road through



the refuge, but only if the Secretary of the Interior first conducted an environmental review and determined that the exchange would be in the public interest.

“After a four-year process of developing the environmental impact record for proposed exchange, a process that begun by former Secretary Salazar and completed by Secretary Jewell, the Department of the Interior issued a Record of Decision in December 2013.

“The Interior Department’s environmental impact statement found that the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge is globally significant, and that the landscape supports an abundance and diversity of wildlife unique to the refuge. I’m sure we’re going to hear about that from Ms. Evans today.

“So that wildlife is unique to the refuge, and years of analysis shows us that it would be irreparable damage by construction and operating of a proposed road. So the record of decision noted that the refuge provides invaluable and potentially irreplaceable nesting and feeding areas for shorebirds and waterfowl, including a habitat of 98 percent of the world’s Pacific Black Brant population and the only non-migratory population of Tundra Swans in the world.

“The Record of Decision also noted that the Interior Department would continue to work with the state of Alaska and local officials on viable alternatives to the road to ensure continued transport improvements for the residents of King Cove.

“Last year, the Army Corps of Engineers issued a report assessing non-road alternatives for an emergency, including the use of ice-capable marine vessels, airport upgrades and the development of a heliport.

“I understand that many in the local community do not support these proposals, I’m sure we’re going to hear as part of our discussion. But hopefully this report furthers our discussion about possible options, and that’s why I think we’re here today.

“We have a panel of witnesses, most of whom have traveled a long way to come testify, so I look forward to hearing their testimony and talking about various transportation options during this morning’s hearing.”

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