

Testimony of Lieutenant Governor Byron Mallott, State of Alaska
Hearing to Conduct Oversight on Options for Addressing the Continuing Lack of Reliable
Emergency Medical Transportation for the Isolated Community of King Cove, Alaska
U.S. Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
Thursday, April 14, 2016
Washington, DC

Chairwoman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on the critically important issue of connecting the Alaska community of King Cove to the nearby community of Cold Bay, so that residents of King Cove may access necessary medical care.

Over the past three decades, scores of King Cove residents have been medically evacuated from King Cove to the nearby community of Cold Bay and, regrettably, more than a dozen individuals have passed away – either due to weather-related aircraft accidents or the inability to obtain timely medical treatment. I am here today to discuss why it is critical to build a road link through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge to connect both communities to ensure that King Cove residents are able to access necessary medical care in Anchorage or elsewhere.

I am an Alaska Native and was born in the southeast Alaska community of Yakutat, the ancestral home of my mother's Tlingit clan. I also had the honor of serving as mayor of my home town. Yakutat – by lower 48 standards – is a remote community, as it is not connected to the state's road system and is primarily served via air and the Alaska Marine Highway System. Yakutat is fortunate enough to have an airport with two paved runways and is served on a regular basis by a major commercial air carrier with jet aircraft.

However, King Cove – along with numerous remote, off-the-road system communities in Alaska – only has a gravel runway that is 3,500 feet long. Such an airport can only be served by small propeller-driven aircraft under Visual Flight Rules – when the airport is actually open. The airport is closed approximately 100 days each year due to extremely high winds and bad weather. Even when it is open, many residents do not want to fly out of the airport due to various reasons, including unpredictable weather and turbulence.

Those who oppose the construction of this critical road argue that most small, remote communities in Alaska have similar types of airports that frequently face bad weather, as well. However, King Cove is fortunate enough to be a relatively short distance away from a paved, all-weather airport in Cold Bay that features a runway in excess of 10,000 feet, instrument approach capabilities and a crosswind runway. In fact, the airport features one of the longest runways in Alaska and also serves as an emergency diversion airport for large commercial and military aircraft crossing the Pacific Ocean.

Beginning in 2007, a hovercraft provided transportation service between King Cove and Cold Bay. However, in 2010, this service ended. The Aleutians East Borough was no longer able to shoulder the high cost – \$1 million per year – to operate the service. Even when the hovercraft was in service, it was not able to operate 30 percent of the time due to severe ocean weather in

the area. Even disembarking a marine vessel in Cold Bay can be precarious – particularly in severe weather. In one case, an Alaska Native elder with a severe heart condition evacuated from King Cove to Cold Bay via marine vessel was not able to climb the ladder at the dock in Cold Bay due to high waves. Ultimately, he had to be lifted in a crab pot from the vessel to the dock. This would never be acceptable in the lower 48 and it should not be acceptable in Alaska, either.

At this time, Coast Guard rescue helicopter services are often used for medical evacuations out of King Cove. I heartily commend Coast Guard personnel – including my fellow witness retired Commander John Whiddon – for providing this critically important service throughout Alaska. However, technically speaking, providing emergency evacuations from communities on land is not part of the Coast Guard’s search and rescue mission. Even though Coast Guard personnel have a well-earned reputation for braving extreme weather conditions to rescue individuals in distress, there are situations where the weather is severe enough that even Coast Guard aircraft need to be grounded. Of course, this is for the safety of the patient and the Coast Guard personnel themselves. This is also a costly operation. It is estimated that it costs the Coast Guard up to \$250,000 per medical evacuation. In a number of cases, the Coast Guard has to dispatch aircraft from Kodiak Island – a 500 mile trip, equivalent to a flight between Richmond, Virginia and Atlanta, Georgia. Continuation of Coast Guard flights is not a viable option in the long term.

The only reasonable option in the long term is a road – a road that will only be used when King Cove residents need to access necessary medical care. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s own Record of Decision (ROD) on the proposed State/Alaska Native Corporation and federal government land exchange to allow for road construction, the road would only be closed an estimated two percent of the time due to weather conditions. This is compared to the 60-70 percent of the time when there is “no safe, reliable and affordable means of transportation,” according to the community of King Cove.

Unfortunately, as you know, the Fish and Wildlife Service concluded in the aforementioned Record of Decision that a road is not an appropriate option. Specifically, they noted their concern that a road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge would be disruptive to wildlife, particularly the black brant species of goose. This is rather ironic, as the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge’s own website promotes hunting of various waterfowl, including the black brant. One hunter may take home up to two black brant per day during the hunting season.

There is also a precedent for road access through this National Wildlife Refuge. In the case of Izembek, there are almost 70 miles of U.S. Military-constructed roads – some of which are in legally-designated wilderness areas. The Fish and Wildlife Service continues to maintain and use approximately 50 miles of these World War II-era roads.

Also, the proposed land exchange would have added over 2,000 acres of eelgrass – habitat for the black brant – to the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. This is more than 20 times the amount that would have been transferred to the State of Alaska pursuant to the proposed land exchange.

Finally, I want to dispel one particular rumor about commercial use of the road. Some critics of the road – including former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt – have claimed that constructing this road is really about transporting employees and seafood between a seafood processing facility in King Cove and the all-weather airport in Cold Bay. Nothing could be further from the truth. According to a March 21, 2014 open letter from Mr. Dale Schwarzmiller, Vice President of Alaska Production for Peter Pan Seafoods, Inc., the company who owns the seafood processing facility in question, states “Thus our only legal use of this road could be for prompt safe access to the airstrip at Cold Bay for our employees in the case of a medical emergency, just as the community at large is seeking.”

As an Alaska Native, hunter, fisherman, a former chair of the Nature Conservancy of Alaska and Lieutenant Governor, I know that constructing a road between King Cove and Cold Bay is the only viable, long-term and responsible thing to do to ensure the health and safety of those who are privileged enough to call the community of King Cove home.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.