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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510–6150

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February 11, 2013

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street N.W. – M.S. 7229
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Secretary,

I am following up on our telephone conversation of last week to again express my strongest displeasure at the extremely troubling decision by your Department to oppose a land exchange that would provide an emergency access route for the people of King Cove, Alaska. Last week, the Department's Fish and Wildlife Service issued a final environmental impact statement, selecting a "preferred alternative" that is intended to kill a land exchange ordered by Congress in 2009. If you do not make a positive public interest finding allowing the land exchange to go forward, that failure to act will prevent the use of a limited-access road between King Cove and Cold Bay, Alaska for medical emergencies – and it will cost even more lives than have already been lost.

Obtaining approval of a road that would allow the roughly 750 year-round Aleut residents of King Cove to access the all-weather runway in Cold Bay (the second-longest runway in the state, with a cross wind runway) in the event of medical emergencies has been one of my principal goals since I arrived in the Senate in 2002. It was also one of my father's leading priorities for the last decade of his service in the body.

Our reason for pursuing the road is simple: it will save lives. This road will not further natural resource development. In fact, the 2009 legislation authorizing the land exchange specifically closed the road to any commercial activity, by law. The road would permit Native Alaskans a more dependable means to get to the all-weather airport at neighboring Cold Bay. At this time of year, when the weather is often too extreme to permit travel by air, the only alternative is a death-defying, 2.5 hour boat trip through 20-foot seas across Cold Bay, followed by a 20-foot climb up a dock ladder – a trip that is simply impossible for many frail patients and pregnant women.

Although King Cove is a thriving fishing community, growing in population to over 1,000 during fishing season, it has some of the worst weather in America, being buffeted by storms

from both the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. The island community is surrounded by high mountains, which cause severe wind shear and turbulence from the down drafts. Because of the winds, the weather, and the terrain, King Cove is an extremely difficult airstrip to navigate, even under the best of circumstances.

Since 1979, more than a dozen residents have lost their lives and countless residents have been injured in air crashes, many caused by the need to attempt to leave the community to gain emergency medical care. King Cove does have a small Indian Health Service Clinic, but only local community health aides, and not a doctor, staff it. Health care is delivered in Anchorage, some 620 air miles away. While, thankfully, the 1981 crash of a medevac flight that claimed the lives of the pilot, nurse, aide, and patient hasn't been repeated recently, just last year, the weather was too bad for commercial medevac flights to attempt to reach King Cove, and the U.S. Coast Guard had to dispatch rescue helicopters from Kodiak on five separate occasions. Fortunately for those individuals, Coast Guard pilots were willing to fly into danger to save their lives. They would probably say that it is just part of their job, but how can we, as public officials, ask these brave men and women to continue to put their own lives at risk, when an alternative is available?

That alternative is a single-lane gravel road that would run for just 11 short miles through the refuge's wilderness area. In 2009, Congress approved authorization for a land exchange pursuant to which the Aleuts and the State of Alaska would give up 61,723 acres of prime waterfowl habitat to be added to the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuges, in return for the State receiving a non-controversial selection of 1,600 acres on Kodiak Island and just 206 acres for the Aleuts. Those 206 acres would be used for a road corridor to allow surface transportation between King Cove and Cold Bay. This was a more than fair exchange. The federal government received nearly 300 times more waterfowl habit than the road will impact – the first new wilderness area designation approved by Congress in Alaska in a generation. The road involves construction of just 11 new miles of road, and between 10 and 12 miles of this single lane gravel road will run through the refuge's wilderness area. Yet, this entire exchange now stands to be nullified if you do not issue a positive decision and make a public interest determination in favor of the road under terms of the 2009 Omnibus Public Land Management Act.

In opting for the "no action" alternative with regard to the land exchange, the Fish and Wildlife Service greatly exaggerated the impact of the road on the refuge. Little fill will be required to build the one-lane gravel road. As the impact statement clearly states, the three-wheel vehicles that travel throughout the refuge on trails first made during World War II already cause far more disturbance to wildlife than will the road – waterfowl having already adjusted to a human presence in the area over the past 70 years. To deny the road simply because of the fear that this land exchange will somehow set a precedent is also inappropriate, as it ignores the stipulations built into the legislation, and the very unique circumstances of the situation.

There is still a chance to make this situation right. Now that the environmental impact statement has been completed, to allow the land exchange to proceed, you are required by law to make a finding that the exchange, including the construction of the road, is in the "public interest." As flawed as the environmental impact statement is, it is only one piece of information. In fact, a Record-of-Decision finalizing the Service's decision still has to be issued, and we

would expect that this Record-of-Decision would not blindly adopt the no action alternative. I simply will not accept a decision by the Department that a determination of the "public interest" can be based solely on a study that only concerned itself with the peace and tranquility of birds and not the lives of the Native Alaskans whose ancestors have lived in King Cove for millennia. There are ample grounds to reverse course and find that the road is in the public interest, and finalize this land exchange.

I could not feel more strongly that the Fish and Wildlife Service's recent decision was wrong, and that, if allowed to stand, it would have grave consequences for the people of King Cove. I must ask at a minimum that before you make the public interest finding that you meet with a Delegation of residents from King Cove to hear in person why this is so vital for their future. They are planning to fly to Washington in early March, but I'm sure they will make the trip whenever you request, prior to a final determination. You need to look them in the eyes when you tell them they matter less to this government than some imagined precedent involving wildlife refuge boundaries. I must tell you that this issue means so much to me that I am prepared to consider all actions available to me as a U.S. Senator to convince this administration that denying the people of King Cove reliable access to medical care would be a travesty. I hope you will meet with King Cove residents and I will certainly deeply appreciate any action you take to reverse this wrong-headed and short-sighted decision by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator

Enclosures: Attached