

Testimony of Stanley Mack
Mayor of the Aleutians East Borough

Testifying Before
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Regarding
The Need and for Reliable Emergency Medical Transportation for the Isolated
Community of King Cove, Alaska

April 14, 2016

Good Morning Senator and Chair Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell, and Members of the Committee. My name is Stanley Mack. I am an Aleut and was born and raised in King Cove. I have been the Mayor of the Aleutians East Borough for the last fourteen years. King Cove is the second largest community in the Borough with a population of 900.

It is my privilege and responsibility this morning to address the Committee on behalf of all King Cove and Aleutians East Borough residents, and to say thank you, Senator Murkowski, for being an incredible champion for our cause.

Simply stated, the residents of King Cove continue to desperately need a dependable, safe, and affordable means of transportation access to the Cold Bay Airport, which is our lifeline to the outside world, particularly for medical and health needs. The only logical form of transportation access is a one-lane, 11-mile gravel road that will connect King Cove's existing road system to the Cold Bay Airport.

The Cold Bay Airport is an anomaly in rural Alaska. It is an all-weather airport having a 10,000' main runway and a 6,500' crosswind runway. It was built by the US military in 1942 as part of the Aleutian campaign in World War II.

It is one of the most accessible, all-weather airports in Alaska and open on a 24-7 basis 365 days a year. Contrast this airport to the King Cove airstrip, which is 18 air miles away and has a 3,000' gravel runway available only during daylight hours.

The King Cove airstrip is precariously located between two mountain peaks. Flights are subject to extreme weather, including turbulence, throughout the year. High winds, thick fog, and snow squalls result in canceled or delayed flights about 100 days a year. Many King Cove residents have a fear of flying because of these conditions.

Our weather is some of the most treacherous in the world with 15-foot seas in winter and winds well over 50 miles per hour throughout most of the year. We tried to make a hovercraft option work to link King Cove with Cold Bay. But after three years of operations, we realized our weather, operational problems, and a required annual subsidy of more than \$1.0 million made this an unacceptable option. As the Borough Mayor, I had a fiduciary responsibility to suspend these unsustainable operations.

As I considered all of my options and responsibilities, I sincerely believed the passage of the 2009 Omnibus Public Lands Act would finally resolve our transportation access problem getting to the Cold Bay Airport. But after Secretary Jewell's decision in December 2013 to not authorize the road, we continue to find ourselves at the mercy of our highly volatile weather, marine conditions, and topographic constraints.

I am also very disappointed and frustrated that the Secretary's decision was based on a very biased and scientifically flawed EIS process completed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It eventually became very clear to me that our local knowledge of the environment does not matter to the federal government. It also became very clear to me that any trust responsibility for indigenous Americans or government-to-government relations are just a bunch of fancy words.

I am also very frustrated that critics still continue to talk about other forms of marine infrastructure and vessels that they believe will adequately address our problems. Those suggestions are simply not viable. We cannot mitigate the forces of nature in our marine environment. I have been a fisherman for over 60 years in this area and I know about the never-ending challenges of the oceans, bays, vessels, and the weather. I have a number of photos to show the Committee that illustrates some of the challenges and weather conditions that we must contend with in dealing with in marine medevacs out of King Cove to the Cold Bay Dock.

Strapping injured or sick patients into a gurney and hoisting them up from the deck of a boat, which can be as much as 20-25 feet below the Cold Bay dock, is always a scary situation. Or, putting elders inside a crab pot and using a crane to hoist up to the top of the dock is frightening. And, most people do not realize that both high winds and ice can prevent us using boats as large as 125' from accessing the Cold Bay dock that extends out from shore a quarter of a mile. The trauma and high risk that these marine medevacs require is very frightening to all of us.

We must have this modest, one-lane gravel road to mitigate these very high-risk air and marine transportation options for transporting our sick and injured residents. Our proposed road is the most logical, safe, and affordable alternative. I respectfully ask the Committee to support our road alternative and allow us the dignity and respect to have what most American citizens simply take for granted.

In closing, I want to again say, Thank You, Senator Murkowski for caring so much about our lives and working with conviction and passion in helping us to achieve this needed road access to the Cold Bay Airport. I respectfully ask all committee members to support Senator Murkowski's efforts to authorize this road and significantly enhance the quality of our lives. Our lives do matter.

Thank you.