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Lawsuit claims Izembek land exchange violates ANILCA

ANCHORAGE—Trustees for Alaska filed a lawsuit on behalf of nine clients in U.S. District Court in Anchorage today that challenges a land exchange between King Cove Corporation and the Department of Interior. In the land exchange, Secretary Ryan Zinke is giving away critical portions of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and wilderness so that a road can be constructed. The exchange was done in secret, behind closed doors.

The lawsuit claims that Secretary Zinke cannot use the land exchange provision of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act to gut a National Wildlife Refuge and circumvent public process, environmental review, and congressional approval.

“Wheeling and dealing away our public lands violates the public interest, and threatens our wilderness areas and the wildlife that depend on them,” said David Raskin, Ph.D., president of Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges. “If the bedrock laws designed to protect places like Izembek are progressively eroded, all of Alaska’s public lands are in jeopardy. These threats extend to all of our nation’s precious public lands and wild places.”

Congress passed ANILCA to preserve natural landscapes, wildlife, unaltered ecosystems, and designated wilderness areas. The road exchange agreement involves giving away a corridor of land between lagoons, a vital

area of an isthmus that forms the heart of the Refuge. No other land can replace the area's value.

"If allowed to stand, this would be the first time that wilderness is taken away from the American public with the stroke of one person's pen," said Katie Strong, senior staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska. "It is shortsighted, unlawful, and contrary to the careful deal struck in ANILCA."

Parties to the lawsuit include Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges; Alaska Wilderness League; the Center for Biological Diversity; Defenders of Wildlife; National Audubon Society; the National Wildlife Refuge Association; Sierra Club; The Wilderness Society; and Wilderness Watch.

Trustees for Alaska is a non-profit public interest environmental law firm founded and based in Alaska to defend and protect Alaska lands, waters, wildlife and communities.