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National parks, refuges and designated wilderness lands in Alaska threatened again by land swap that would make way for a road in Izembek Refuge

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a draft environmental impact statement today that outlines a potential land swap that would make way for a road in Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. The proposed road would threaten migratory birds, the subsistence traditions of local communities across Western Alaska, and the ecological health of the region.

"We're deeply concerned about any land swap and road project because of the threat to subsistence resources, the health of wildlife populations, and the integrity of all conservation lands, including national parks, refuges and designated wilderness areas in Alaska," said Brook Brisson, senior staff attorney for Trustees. "The Alaska National Interest Lands Claims Act designated conservation lands precisely to protect subsistence and wildlife. We will thoroughly review this draft statement and work with partners to raise concerns about the health of animals like Pacific black brant and emperor geese and the continued protection of conservation lands in Alaska."

A road over the narrow Izembek Isthmus from Kind Cove to Cold Bay's larger airport has been promoted as a means for providing emergency medical access for King Cove. Today's draft statement selects a land exchange and road as the agency's preferred option, despite alternatives that do not damage park or refuge lands and subsistence resources. A marine ferry has been proposed as a reliable alternative and substantial funds have been allocated to upgrade King Cove's and Cold Bay's port and other infrastructure.

The Native Village of Hooper Bay and its village corporation have long opposed a road through the Izembek, and dozens of other tribes and tribal entities in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and Alaska have passed resolutions opposing a land swap and road through Izembek, noting the importance of Izembek to important food resources and traditions.

Trustees for Alaska went to court to stop several similar Trump era land exchanges and won in U.S. District Court, ultimately ending up in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals where the case was dismissed as moot in 2023 after Secretary Haaland withdrew a previous land swap deal negotiated by Secretary Bernhardt in 2019.

The proposed land exchange in today's draft environmental impact statement would swap lands owned by King Cove Corporation for Izembek Refuge and Wilderness Area lands managed by Fish and Wildlife. Such an exchange would fail to provide ecologically equivalent value to the region and also potentially make way for other land swaps in other parks, refuges, and Wilderness lands in Alaska that erode the established conservation system across the state.

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