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Groups sue Interior for illegal land swap that threatens Izembek National Wildlife Refuge

ANCHORAGE, AK—Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges and allied groups sued the Interior Department and King Cove Corporation today in U.S. District Court for signing a land exchange agreement aimed at making way for a road on a narrow isthmus in Izembek National Wildlife Refuge.

The proposed road would endanger food sources and cultural hunting practices of western Alaska communities as well as the health of a vast and thriving ecosystem vital to animals and migratory birds like Brant and Emperor geese. The land swap further threatens federally protected lands across Alaska by allowing an agency appointee to single handedly trade land in national parks, refuges or other conservation areas to benefit private interests.

“Our Friends group supports the purposes of all 16 of Alaska's national wildlife refuges, which for Izembek is the conservation of not only waterfowl and shorebirds but also salmon, brown bears, and the caribou herd that migrates across the isthmus,” **said Marilyn Sigman, president of Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges.** “Trading the ownership of refuge lands that Congress designated for conservation is a terrible precedent for the privatization of public lands. Building a road will have tremendous impacts on fish and wildlife habitat and could also greatly increase both disturbance and sport hunting pressure on vulnerable species.”

The land exchange announced in October swapped lands owned by King Cove Corporation for Izembek Refuge and Wilderness Area lands managed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Today's [lawsuit challenges the agency](#) with violating the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Administrative Procedure Act and National Environmental Policy Act.

“Alaskans worried about jobs, food, and airport safety keep facing closed doors during a government shutdown while the administration finds the time and funds to hand over irreplaceable public lands to private interests in order to plow a road through the heart of Izembek National Wildlife Refuge,” **said Siobhan McIntyre, a staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska.** “In its haste to force this land transfer through, the Interior Department tried to carve its illegal actions in stone by immediately issuing a land patent to the King Cove Corporation. It does not matter how many documents the Interior secretary signs, or how quickly, this land exchange is illegal, and we look forward to hauling this administration into court to protect Izembek Refuge.”

The Native Village of Hooper Bay has long opposed a road through Izembek, and dozens of other tribes and tribal entities in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta have passed resolutions opposing a land swap and road, noting the importance of Izembek to critical food resources and traditions. Another lawsuit brought by the Native villages of Hooper Bay, Paimiut, and Chevak was also [filed today](#).

A road over the narrow Izembek isthmus from King Cove to Cold Bay has been considered many times, and the Interior Department has repeatedly found that a road would cause long-term and irreparable damage to Izembek's unique and ecologically important habitat. A federally funded hovercraft was provided to the King Cove community as a viable alternative to a road, and it successfully completed all requested medical evacuations during its operation. Despite performing how it was intended, the hovercraft operation was suspended in 2010 and sold.

Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges and allied groups sued over [several similar land exchanges](#) from the prior Trump term. Former Secretary Haaland withdrew a 2019 deal negotiated by Secretary Bernhardt. Haaland identified legal problems in the 2019 land exchange and initiated an environmental review process in 2023. Interior released a draft environmental impact statement in 2024 that proposed a land swap. That process was never completed.

Law firm Trustees for Alaska represents five clients in the case: Friends of Alaska Wildlife Refuges, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, Alaska Wilderness League, Wilderness Watch, Sierra Club.

Client quotes:

“The sole purpose of this land exchange is to facilitate the construction of a 13-mile road through the protected tundra and wetlands of the world-renowned Izembek Wilderness and National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska,” **said George Nickas, executive director of Wilderness Watch**. “If built, the road through the Izembek Wilderness would be catastrophic for the critters that live there and would essentially cut the 307,982-acre Izembek Wilderness in two.”

“Izembek is one of the most ecologically important wetlands on Earth, home to some of the largest eelgrass beds in the world and vital habitat for species like Pacific black brant, Emperor geese, brown bears and caribou,” **said Maddie Halloran, state director at Alaska Wilderness League**. “Trading away Congressionally designated wilderness to build a road through the heart of a national wildlife refuge undermines ANILCA, sets a dangerous precedent for all protected lands in Alaska, and hands over public land for private and commercial interests.”

“The Trump administration is taking their own bad deal and making it even worse,” **said Athan Manuel, director of Sierra Club's Lands Protection program**. “The exchange for a road and land swap in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge has been studied, reviewed, amended, and rejected for the better part of a decade. It would set a terrible precedent and would severely damage this important wilderness. By entering this exchange, the Trump administration is tearing up a plan they themselves designed and advancing a version that will be even more destructive to fragile landscapes and wildlife populations. There are viable, reliable alternatives that meet the needs of King Cove residents without threatening the integrity of the Izembek Refuge, but this plan is not it.”

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