



TRUSTEES FOR ALASKA

PROTECT | DEFEND | REPRESENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 18, 2026

Court says Interior's Izembek land swap broke the law

Decision vacates land exchange

ANCHORAGE, AK—A U.S. District Court held that the Interior Department violated several federal laws when it gave away federally protected lands to the King Cove Corporation to make way for a road on a narrow isthmus in Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness. [The decision](#) vacates the land exchange.

"The ruling confirms the extraordinary value of these lands for wildlife conservation, including the world's entire population of nesting black brant along with salmon, brown bears, caribou, and local subsistence harvests, was clearly recognized by its inclusion in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge through the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act," **said Marilyn Sigman, president of Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuge**. "We are profoundly grateful for today's decision, and we will continue to advocate for stewardship of all of Alaska's 16 unique national wildlife refuges."

The exchange endangered the health of a vast and thriving ecosystem vital to animals like caribou, brown bears, and globally vital migratory birds such as Brant and Emperor geese. The deal would also have set a dangerous precedent by allowing an agency appointee to trade away designated wilderness land across Alaska for a road in order to circumvent congress.

"The Court found that the Secretary tossed the rule book out the window to push through a project with destructive consequences," **said Michelle Sinnott, senior staff attorney with Trustees**. "Today's ruling rightly calls out Interior for abandoning its obligations to protect public lands."

The land exchange announced by Interior in October 2025 swapped lands owned by King Cove Corporation for Izembek Refuge and Wilderness Area lands managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Our [lawsuit challenged the agency](#) for violating the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Administrative Procedure Act, and National Environmental Policy Act.

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. The Native villages of Hooper Bay, Paimiut, and Chevak also [filed a lawsuit challenging the land exchange](#).

Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges and allied groups sued over [several similar land exchanges](#) from the first Trump term.

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:

"This is a profoundly critical victory for Izembek and all of Wilderness, Refuges and National Parks in Alaska, and for the Alaska Natives who rely on them for subsistence," **said Kevin Proescholdt, conservation director for Wilderness Watch.** "Successive administrations have tried to undermine the essential wildland protections in ANILCA, but fortunately those of us who care about these special places and the wildlife that live there have the law on our side," said Kevin Proescholdt, Wilderness Watch's Conservation Director.

"Today's decision is a victory for one of America's most extraordinary wildlife refuges and for the laws that protect our public lands. Izembek is irreplaceable, and this ruling affirms that these special places cannot simply be traded away without consideration of the impacts," **said Andy Moderow, senior director of policy, Alaska Wilderness League.**

"Today's ruling reaffirms a simple principle: our public lands cannot be traded away behind closed doors to sidestep the law. The Izembek National Wildlife Refuge was set aside because it is one of the most important wildlife habitats on Earth, and Congress established clear legal protections to safeguard it. Those protections exist for a reason," **said Dan Ritzman, the Lands, Water and Wildlife director for the Sierra Club's Our Wild America campaign.** "This decision helps ensure that decisions affecting treasured public lands are made lawfully, transparently, and with the public interest—not private interests—at the forefront. We'll continue working to protect Izembek's wildlife, subsistence resources, and wild character for future generations."

Contact:

Madison Grosvenor, communications specialist, Trustees for Alaska,
mgrosvenor@trustees.org, 907-433-2016

Dawnell Smith, communications director, Trustees for Alaska,
dsmith@trustees.org, 907-433-2013

Marilyn Sigman, president of Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges,
marilyn.sigman@gmail.com, (907) 299-1645

Kevin Proescholdt, Wilderness Watch, kevinp@wildernesswatch.org, 612-201-9266

Anja Semanco, communications director, Alaska Wilderness League,
anja@alaskawild.org, 724-967-2777