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WILDERNESS
SOCIETY

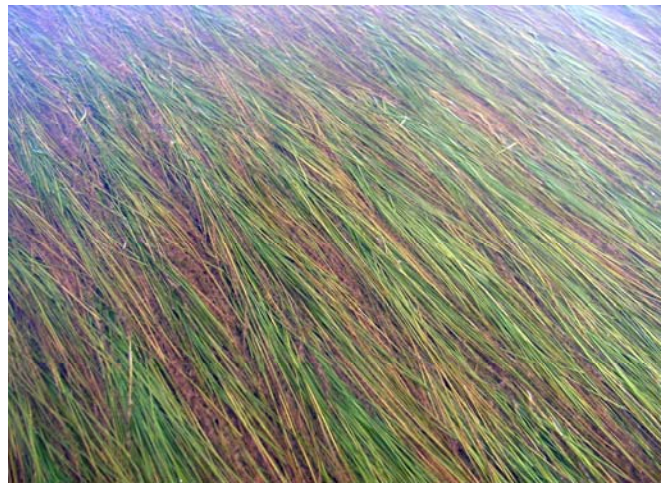
High Costs, Significant Losses Izembek Road Doesn't Make Sense

Exchange Offers Quantity, but not Quality

H.R.2801/S.1680, introduced by Alaska's Congressional delegation, proposes to add more than 61,000 acres of land to Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, with over 45,000 acres designated as wilderness, in exchange for removing approximately 206 acres from wilderness designation and building a road through the heart of the refuge. Congress rejected a road through this globally significant wildlife habitat in 1998, finding it was not in the national public's interest. A road is still not acceptable, and no exchange lands can provide habitat comparable to those that would be impacted by a road.

Quality v. Quantity

At the core of Izembek National Wildlife Refuge are two lagoons, Izembek and Kinzarof. Izembek and Kinzarof Lagoons are separated by a narrow isthmus about 3 miles wide. Combined, these lagoons, their watersheds, and the isthmus—the Lagoons Complex—make up the ecological heart of the refuge. The area has been recognized internationally for having some of the most striking wildlife and wilderness values in the northern hemisphere. Some of the largest eelgrass beds in the world are found within Izembek and Kinzarof Lagoons. These eelgrass beds attract hundreds of thousands of waterfowl and other migratory birds, and support fish, invertebrates, and marine mammals, including a Threatened sea otter population. The isthmus separating the two lagoons is a vital migratory corridor and foraging area for wildlife, and it is the only path between the west and east sides of the refuge.



Izembek's eelgrass beds, among the largest in the world, are at the core of a diverse coastal ecosystem that supports fish, invertebrates, marine mammals, birds, and other wildlife.

The exchange lands being proposed would not provide habitat comparable to the Lagoons Complex. Indeed, no amount of exchange lands can compensate for the irreversible impacts a road would have on these globally significant wildlife habitat values.

Habitat value of lands proposed for exchange

State Townships: The two townships offered by the State (approximately 43,000 acres) do not include comparable wetlands habitat. The southernmost state township is entirely uplands, with some bear denning habitat, but virtually no value for waterfowl. The more northern township has some wetlands values with some good caribou and brown bear habitat, but contains limited value for the many species of waterfowl found in the lagoons and isthmus wetlands complex. The state townships also have no current development threat, and as such, offer little net conservation benefit.

King Cove Corporation lands:

- 1) Corporation owned lands offered along the eastern shore of Cold Bay (relinquished ANILCA selections ~5,430 acres) are primarily uplands with little to no value for caribou or important waterfowl species, such as Pacific Brant, emperor geese and Threatened Steller's eiders.
- 2) Lands offered in the Mortensen Lagoon parcel (~10,800 acres) include wetlands with some swan and shorebird habitat value, but this area does not attract the high level of use by critical migratory waterfowl species such as Pacific brant, emperor goose or the Threatened Steller's eider compared to the Lagoons Complex. A USFWS 1997 King Cove Road Briefing Report indicates that the Mortensen Lagoon area is a "medium use" area for Canada goose and northern pintail, whereas the lagoons and isthmus complex is a "high-use" area for the Threatened Steller's eider and virtually the entire world's population of Pacific brant and emperor geese. Additionally, the Mortensen Lagoon parcel contains significantly less tidelands, especially important for shorebirds, and is not sufficient to compensate for the tremendous impact a road would have on the critically important Lagoon Complex. Further, a road adjacent to these lands already exists on King Cove Corporation lands, and will continue to be used, which diminishes the overall wilderness and conservation value of these lands.
- 3) The "bookend" parcels at the mouth of Kinzarof Lagoon (~2,500 acres) contain high waterfowl habitat value, but currently have no development threat. As such, these lands do not offer a comparable exchange.

State Refuge Lands: The exchange proposal includes an offer to make Kinzarof Lagoon a State refuge. Although Kinzarof Lagoon is valuable from a conservation perspective, the state historically has not made State Game Refuge management a priority. For example, Izembek State Game Refuge was established in 1972 and still has no management plan and virtually no state refuge personnel overseeing refuge activities. By remaining in state ownership the future of Kinzarof Lagoon would remain in question and may not add significant benefit to the federal refuge.

Bottom Line:

The road proposed by H.R.2801/S.1680 is incompatible with the purposes of Izembek refuge. A road would destroy wilderness values, and create serious threats to sensitive bird populations, brown bears, caribou, and many other species. The proposed road would cut through the ecological heart of the refuge, degrading globally significant habitat. The proposed land exchange would add acreage but not value to the refuge. Further, the value of any exchange lands would be diminished if the heart of the refuge is lost. Finally, H.R.2801/S.1680 legally contradicts the King Cove Health and Safety Act, which specifically disallows a road through Izembek Wilderness.

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