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Democracy Dies in Darkness

KING COVE: ROAD TO NOWHERE

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In the effort to meet the health and safety needs of the citizens of King Cove, Alaska, there is a better, lifesaving solution than a single-lane, \$30 million gravel road that would degrade a pristine wilderness and take five years to build {"King Cove's Relentless Road War," news story, May 27}.

For less than \$150,000, a modern tele-medicine facility, linked to medical specialists in Anchorage, can reduce the need for medevacs by half. In good weather, medevacs can be done by existing commercial airplanes. A boat ambulance that can travel the 20 sea miles in rough weather could be bought for less than \$1 million. In the worst weather, a Coast Guard helicopter from Kodiak or a cutter from the Bering Sea could perform the rescue mission. Tele-medicine already is saving lives in other Alaskan bush communities.

The road proposal is a taxpayer boondoggle at a cool \$1 million per mile. It is an environmental boondoggle that is destructive to bird and wildlife habitat. It mandates for the first time road development in a federally designated wilderness area. And the road frequently would be impassable for emergency medical evacuation because of high winds, blizzards and avalanches.

The lifesaving, cost-effective, environmentally sound, taxpayer-friendly peace settlement to the King Cove road war already is available: We should build the tele-medicine facility supported by a boat ambulance today. DANIEL P. BEARD Senior Vice President for Public Policy National Audubon Society Washington

The article on the proposed road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness Area understated the environmental and cultural damage that such a road would cause and overstated the case for the road.

The proposed road is opposed by more than 50 native Alaskan villages, 20 environmental groups and waterfowl hunters up and down the Pacific flyway. The road would cut through 18 miles of the Izembek refuge (not seven, as the story said), bisecting a narrow isthmus between the Izembek and Kinzarof lagoons. The lagoons are seasonal home to this continent's entire population of Pacific black brant and emperor geese, half of the world's Steller's eiders and hundreds of thousands of other waterfowl. Dozens of native Alaskan villages that subsist on waterfowl hunting would suffer, as villagers have pointed out repeatedly.

The medical director for the Eastern Aleutian tribes has said that improved medical facilities and/or a ferry system would be far preferable to a road -- not to mention cheaper. In fact, he and many others have raised concerns that a road through avalanche-prone territory would create its own set of health and safety issues.

While King Cove is quite isolated, the same can be said for all villages in the Aleutian Region and about 200 more elsewhere in Alaska. The proposed \$30 million road would serve, when not impassable, one village with fewer than 800 people. It just doesn't make sense.

Alaska's delegation in Congress is in constant search of excuses to bulldoze roads, dig mines, build pipelines, drill for oil, clear-cut ancient forests or otherwise "develop" this extraordinary land. Alaska is a unique part of our natural legacy, and the lands there that belong to all Americans should be carefully protected. WILLIAM H. MEADOWS President The Wilderness Society Washington

The May 27 article on the proposed road between King Cove and Cold Bay in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska shows yet another example of the uncaring attitude of the Department of Interior and environmental groups toward the needs of local people.

Residents of King Cove are cut off from the outside by sea much of the time in winter because of the high waves, and the same strong winds that cause the angry seas cause landing and takeoff problems for helicopters, Hovercraft and fixed-wing aircraft. For more than 200 days of the year access in and out is practically impossible.

One has only to visit these isolated areas to see how unreasonable it is to shut the village off from the outside by denying access to the jet runway at Cold Bay and to medical and other needed help in Anchorage. Some say the locals want the road to transport the fish catch. Even if that were true, they should not be denied the right to make a better living.

The people are not asking for something for nothing but are offering 650 acres of tribal land for the needed one-lane road. They are even willing to restrict use of the road during the peak migrating season for the 200,000 birds in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness.

The bill for the easement for the seven-mile gravel road, sponsored by Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), which President Clinton says he will veto, should be passed so the road can be built.

Clearly, this is a wild and beautiful land and should be conserved as much as possible, but the health and safety of citizens who live in King Cove should be the primary consideration. BETTY RAMSEY Vienna

The recent article on the proposed construction of a road through the Izembek refuge failed to note the considerable cost of the program.

It would cost an estimated \$29 million to \$44 million simply to construct the 30-mile Izembek Road -- about \$1 million per mile. Federal highway funds are expected to cover 90 percent of the construction expenses. That's between \$29,000 and \$44,000 in federal tax money for each of the 1,000 direct beneficiaries in King Cove and the neighboring community of Cold Bay.

This despite the fact that no road in Alaska always will be open. Winter storms likely will close the road frequently, putting the residents of King Cove right back where they started -- without access to health care in times of crisis.

There are better, more cost-effective ways of solving the problem. Improving the availability of care within King Cove is one option. The Fish and Wildlife Service endorses alternatives such as improved ferry or air service, airport improvements and helicopter or Hovercraft service. Each of these options would be more cost-effective than the Izembek Road proposal while increasing access to medical care for King Cove's residents.

Providing such access is important. Creating sound fiscal policy for our tax dollars also is worthwhile. Here, there's no trade-off between the two. Let's explore our options before we throw money to a wasteful and damaging program. CHRIS BURLEY Communications Coordinator Taxpayers for Common Sense Washington

