



# Izembek National Wildlife Refuge

Proposed road is bad for taxpayers and fails to address safety

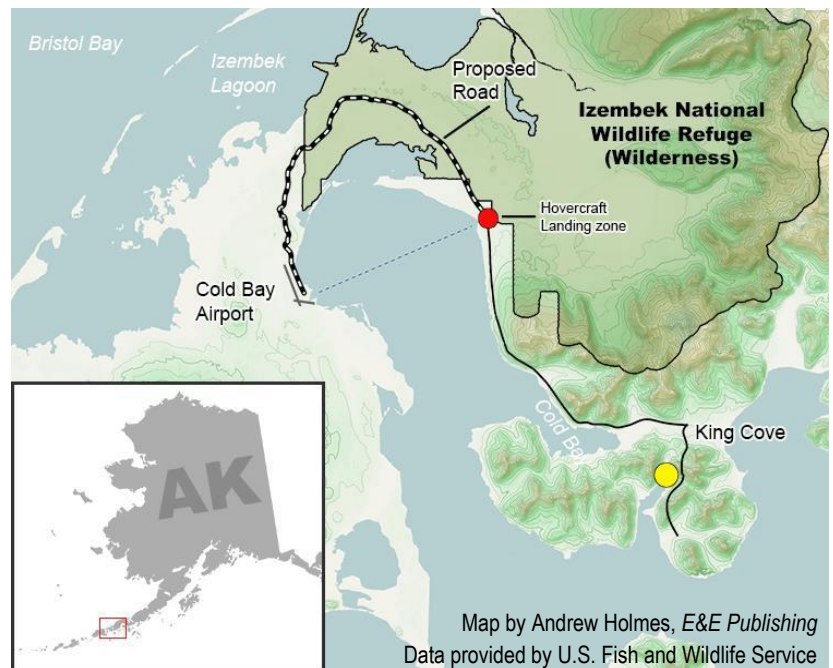
Located on the tip of the Alaska Peninsula, Izembek National Wildlife Refuge is internationally recognized as an important wetland, protected as a wildlife refuge and designated as a wilderness area. It's one of Alaska's most ecologically diverse wildlife refuges, with lagoons, tundra and stunning mountain peaks. This incredible habitat is home to brown bears, caribou, salmon and other wildlife. Its irreplaceable wetlands are so special, in 1986 they became one of the first wetland areas in the United States to be designated a "Wetland of International Importance." Tens of thousands of waterfowl, seabirds and shorebirds from throughout the Pacific Flyway rely on the Izembek refuge for nesting and feeding. In fact, each fall the refuge shelters nearly the world's entire population of Pacific black brant, a sea bird, as they gorge themselves on the refuge's eelgrass beds in preparation for their non-stop migration to wintering grounds in Mexico.

## Controversial road proposed through the refuge

The Izembek refuge lies between the small Alaskan villages of Cold Bay (population 108) and King Cove (population 938). The community of King Cove claims a road across Izembek's isthmus is needed to assure safe transport to Cold Bay's larger airstrip in the event of an emergency. But U.S. taxpayers already paid over \$50 million to provide a safe, reliable medical response system to the community in the form of a multimillion dollar improvement to medical facilities, the construction of a new marine terminal and connecting road and a state-of-the-art \$9 million hovercraft. The hovercraft successfully performed every medical evacuation while in operation, transporting a fully staffed ambulance to Cold Bay in as little as 20 minutes in nearly all kinds of weather.

King Cove voluntarily elected to end the hovercraft service and gave away the hovercraft to a nearby community. They then renewed their call for a road through Izembek that commercial interests have been pursuing since long before the issue of medical evacuation was raised. Notably, the annual costs of the hovercraft were roughly equivalent to the estimated annual maintenance costs of the proposed road.

In response, the Alaskan delegation inserted a provision in the Omnibus Public Land Management Act



**The proposed road and hovercraft landing zone location.**

of 2009 (P.L. 111- 11) that would have stripped the land needed for the road out of the Izembek refuge and exchanged the wilderness quality area for comparably low quality state lands. But the exchange required a public interest determination by the Secretary of the Interior who, after a detailed assessment, determined in 2013 that the road through pristine wilderness and the associated land exchange were not in the public interest, citing the irreparable harm to Izembek's land, water, and wildlife and the availability of alternative transportation systems.

The Izembek Refuge is subjected to frequent violent winter storms, making travel along the proposed land route extremely dangerous. The road would likely be impassable for much of the year due to frequent icing, high winds, and blizzards. Travel time from King Cove to Cold Bay along the proposed road in good conditions is estimated at two hours, compared to the 20 minutes for the hovercraft. Pete Mjos, the region's former U.S. Public Health Service director, has said that attempting to travel on the proposed road during the region's extreme winter storms would be "foolish beyond reason" and "would clearly jeopardize life."

**"Combined with darkness, avalanche conditions, and ice-glazed roads, an attempt to travel the proposed road would be foolish beyond any reason."**

**- Dr. Peter Mjos, former U.S. Indian Health Service medical director for the King Cove area.**



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**The proposed road would have to cross and fill wetlands of international importance.**

### **\$75 million price tag to taxpayers**

The federal government has already invested over \$37.5 million to address the health, safety and transportation concerns of King Cove. The federal government paid an additional \$13 million for the King Cove Access Completion Project to complete the road extension from the existing hovercraft terminal at Lenard Harbor to the permanent terminal site at the Northeast corner of Cold Bay. The proposed road would cost American taxpayers at least an additional \$24 million. The best estimates suggest that between past efforts to enhance medical and transportation services to the communities and the construction of the proposed road, the final bill to the American taxpayer would be at least \$75 million, an extraordinary expense in a time of federal budget austerity.

### **A terrible precedent**

Wilderness and national wildlife refuges are two of the most important conservation designations in the country and they are supposed to be permanent. The proposal at Izembek would trade out wilderness and refuge lands to skirt these protections, setting a terrible precedent for sensitive conservation lands across the country.



A hovercraft uses massive blowers to create a cushion of air allowing it to travel over land or water. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchased the 98-foot Suna-X hovercraft capable of carrying 50 passengers and 22 tons of freight including a fully loaded ambulance for King Cove. The hovercraft can reach a top speed of almost 60 mph, and could cross Cold Bay in only 20 minutes.