

AUTHORIZING A LAND TRANSFER FOR A ROAD THROUGH IZEMBEK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Passed: 248-179

SUMMARY:

The House passed a bill that would authorize a land EXCHANGE between the federal government and Alaska to build a road through a wilderness area in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, damaging world-class wildlife habitat and undermining fundamental environmental laws. (*July 20, 2017, Roll Call No. 406*)

BACKGROUND:

Located on the Aleutian Peninsula in Alaska, Izembek National Wildlife Refuge is an internationally recognized wetland habitat for multiple sensitive and threatened species. Izembek Refuge is an incredibly ecologically diverse refuge and home to brown and grizzly bears, caribou, salmon and multiple species of migratory birds. Tens of thousands of migratory birds that use the Pacific Flyway, including nearly the world's entire population of Pacific black brant, rely on the refuge for nesting and feeding.

For years, Alaska's congressional delegation has attempted to authorize the construction of a road through the heart of the refuge, a federally-designated wilderness area. The nearby 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 have already paid more than \$50 million to provide a safe, reliable medical response system to the community, including a hovercraft. Despite successful performance of the hovercraft in medical evacuations, King Cove suspended the service, citing maintenance costs—costs in the ballpark of estimates for maintaining the proposed road.

In the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, Congress directed Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell to conclude a four-year environmental analysis of the Izembek road. Secretary Jewell decided to support the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's preferred alternative to decline a land exchange with Alaska to build the road. In 2015, the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska upheld Secretary Jewell's decision.

In 2017, Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) introduced H.R. 218, the King Cove Road Land Exchange Act to transfer environmentally valuable habitat from the Department of the Interior to the state of Alaska in exchange for comparably lower quality lands currently managed by the state. The transfer would make room for a road corridor, which the Alaska legislature has included in its capital budget.

Building a road through the heart of the refuge would be incredibly damaging to the important wildlife habitat there. The road would bisect the isthmus, splitting up habitat that is now contiguous. The construction of the road would also require the filling-in of nearby wetlands. Allowing this road would also set a terrible precedent and undermine many of our nation's bedrock environmental laws, including the Wilderness Act, National Environmental Policy Act, National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.

OUTCOME:

On July 20, 2017, the House passed the H.R. 218, 248-179. “No” was the pro-conservation vote. This legislation awaits consideration by the Senate.