

Blue Goose Alliance Bulletin

#55 - July 18, 2007

The Blue Goose Alliance, along with other conservation organizations, have joined together in objecting to H.R. 2801, legislation sponsored by Representative Don Young, that would authorize a land exchange and road corridor through the very heart of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and its Congressionally-designated Wilderness. The text of their letter sent to select members of Congress follows in its entirety along with a letter on the same issue from Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall to the Honorable Todd Tiaht.

June 21, 2007

House of Representatives
U.S. Congress
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

The undersigned organizations strongly oppose H.R. 2801, legislation sponsored by Representative Don Young that would authorize a land exchange and road corridor through the very heart of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and its Congressionally-designated Wilderness. The proposed road would be fundamentally incompatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established and would pose serious threats to the unique concentrations of wildlife in the area, including migratory bird populations, brown bears, caribou, and the habitats on which they depend.

The Izembek National Wildlife Range was established by Public Land Order in 1960, but Congress designated it a National Wildlife Refuge and established the Izembek Wilderness in 1980 as part of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act to safeguard the refuge's extraordinary ecological values and to protect waterfowl, shorebirds, and wetlands of national and international significance. The Reagan Administration in 1987 recognized Izembek as the first site named by the United States under the Convention on Wetlands of International Significance. Steller's Eider, which is listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act, use the refuge as do other migratory birds, including Pacific Black Brant, Emperor Goose and Dunlin, all of which are listed as declining and vulnerable in Alaska on Audubon's 2005 WatchList.

Construction, use of the road and associated activity, disturbance, and pollution all conflict with the purposes for which the Izembek NWR was established. In 1984, the Fish and Wildlife Service's Comprehensive Conservation Plan irrefutably states that the proposed road in Izembek NWR would be incompatible with refuge purposes due to the potential for major adverse environmental impacts. They noted that "protecting the

ecological integrity of the Kinzarof Lagoon is extremely important,” and also stated that “the road could result in major, long-term impacts to subsistence uses ...” Nothing in the current proposed land exchange changes these facts.

By 1998, the debate shifted to Congress during passage of the King Cove Health and Safety Act, which reiterated that a road through Izembek Wilderness is not in the public interest. Congress’ intent that a road not be built through Izembek’s designated Wilderness was made explicit in the King Cove Act’s Section 353:

(a) ...In no instance may any part of such road...pass over any land within the Congressionally-designated wilderness...(d) All actions undertaken pursuant to this section must be in accordance with all other applicable laws.

Also in 1998, Congress provided over \$37 million of taxpayer money to Alaskans to address the health and safety concerns raised by the community of King Cove. That \$37 million federal payment was intended to upgrade medical facilities, the airstrip, and airport facilities at King Cove, purchase a hovercraft, and construct an unpaved road and marine terminal to provide safe and rapid transportation between the communities of King Cove and Cold Bay.

A few years after the King Cove Act was enacted, Senator Stevens inserted language into the Energy and Water Appropriations bill directing that a 17-mile road be built up to the northeast corner of Cold Bay, where a marine terminal would be constructed for the hovercraft. That bill passed in 2003 and construction of the 17-mile road began in March, 2004. The Aleutians East Borough that encompasses these communities has spent over \$25 million to construct the 17-mile road. In spite of this expenditure, the road remains unfinished and construction has been halted due to unstable volcanic soils along the route, and until additional funds can be found. A temporary terminal facility is located at Lenard Harbor for operation of the hovercraft to Cold Bay.

The King Cove Health and Safety Act adequately addressed the health and safety concerns of the community by providing a substantial level of tax dollars for a state-of-the-art medical facility, airport upgrades, and a marine transportation link to Cold Bay. The marine link between Lenard Harbor and Cold Bay is the most reasonable and safest transportation mode, which also causes the least harm to the environment. The hovercraft alternative, selected over a standard ferry by Aleutians East Borough, began operating this year and should be given a chance to fully demonstrate its capability to provide rapid, safe transportation between the towns. An improved ferry system has the potential to not only benefit King Cove, but many other communities in the region.

We urge Congress to protect the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and its Congressionally-designated Wilderness by rejecting H.R. 2801, Representative Young’s land exchange and road corridor proposal.

Thank you for considering our views.

Alaska Center for the Environment * Alaska Wilderness League *
Alaska Wildlife Alliance * Audubon Alaska * Blue Goose Alliance * Defenders of
Wildlife * Friends of Alaska Wildlife Refuges *
National Audubon Society * Natural Resources Defense Council *
National Wildlife Federation * National Wildlife Refuge Association * Northern Alaska
Environmental Center *
Republicans for Environmental Protection * Sierra Club *
The Wilderness Society * Trustees for Alaska * U.S. PIRG *
World Wildlife Fund * Wilderness Watch

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Washington, D.C. 20240

June 25, 2007

The Honorable Todd Tiahrt
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Tialrt:

I am writing in regard to requests from your staff for our views on a bill that would authorize land exchanges between the United States, acting through the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the State of Alaska and King Cove Corporation. The lands in question are part of Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and would provide a road right of way between the town of King Cove and the town of Cold Bay, Alaska.

During my testimony regarding the Service's budget in March, Congressman Dicks asked about my thoughts on such a land exchange. I answered that neither the Secretary of the Interior nor I would propose such a land exchange, but if Congress asked for our opinion on a bill we would evaluate that bill to determine the values offered for wildlife and wilderness, as well as what benefits such a bill might provide to the future of wilderness area protection. That remains our position. Congressional action would be required to complete such an exchange.

Though we are not taking an official position at this time on the bill under discussion, I can say that we will scrutinize any proposal to remove land from wilderness or any other public land designation. As trustees of public lands, we must ensure that any change in the public estate improves the ecological and social values available to the public from wilderness areas, refuges, and other public lands. On its face, the bill offers more than 61,000 acres in exchange for 1,600 acres of National Wildlife Refuge lands. Of that, more than 41,000 acres would be exchanged to make up for 206 acres of wilderness lands. These proposals would offer approximately 38 acres for every acre of wet lands and wildlife habitat, and nearly 200 acres for every acre of wilderness exchanged. I have

personally visited Izembek Refuge and flown the areas being proposed. The wilderness values of the lands are significant and include large areas of tundra swan nesting, as well as caribou movement.

We recognize the special needs of Alaska residents to have access to medical, dental, and other care. We also recognize our responsibility to the American people to ensure lands are held in trust to provide wilderness and other values. This bill offers a proposal that we believe warrants further discussion to fully determine if the needs of both the King Cove residents and the people of the United States would be properly evaluated and met. Legal issues such as ANILCA must also be fully discussed.

We, therefore, believe there is merit in continuing discussions of the bill before we can offer an official position on behalf of the Administration. If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Sincerely,

/s/ H. Dale Hall
DIRECTOR

This Bulletin and all previous Bulletins are available in PDF format at:
<http://www.bluegoosealliance.org>

**NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES....WHERE THE EXTRAORDINARY IS
EVERY DAY**