

Critics decry land bill's Alaska 'Road to Nowhere'

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WASHINGTON (AP) — First there was the "Bridge to Nowhere." Now Congress appears set to approve another remote Alaska project that critics call the "road to nowhere."

Tucked away in a giant public lands bill that could reach a final Senate vote Thursday is a project to build a gravel road through a national wildlife refuge that is home to hundreds of thousands of migratory birds, salmon and other animals, including caribou, brown bear and sea otters.

Environmentalists and some members of Congress call the road another Alaska boondoggle and say it would be an environmental disaster.

Supporters, including all three Alaska members of Congress, say the road is needed to connect a remote village on the Bering Sea that now uses a hovercraft to reach an airport and hospital.

The Senate voted 68-24 Wednesday to move the legislation to a final vote. The bill sets aside more than 2 million acres in nine states as protected wilderness. Approval is also expected in the House.

Sponsored by Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, one provision would allow her state to build an airport access road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, on the Alaska Peninsula about 600 miles southwest of Anchorage.

The measure authorizes a land swap that would give the state a seven-mile easement through the refuge. The easement would let the state complete a 25-mile gravel road linking King Cove, with a population of 800, to Cold Bay, where there is an all-weather airport.

In exchange, the state and other landowners would transfer more than 61,000 acres to the federal government, including about 43,000 acres that would be designated as wilderness.

Murkowski, the top Republican on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said many King Cove residents have been stranded in emergencies due to bad weather.

She called the proposed road "narrow and unobtrusive."

"Exchanging 206 acres for a potentially lifesaving road and 61,723 acres from the King Cove Corp. and the State of Alaska is more than fair deal for the federal government," she said.

Environmentalists contend that the road is unnecessary and is really aimed at making it easier for employees of a King Cove fish processing plant to get to and from work. The Izembek refuge also abuts the North Aleutian Basin, one of the nation's largest untapped petroleum reserves.

The road "won't work as advertised and won't save lives. The only way it makes any sense at all is if you tie it to oil and gas development," said Evan Hirsche, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, an advocacy group.

The refuge group dubbed the project the "Road to Nowhere" in a report last year, linking it to another Alaska project, a proposed but later abandoned \$400 million bridge connecting Ketchikan to an island with 50 residents and an airport. The "Bridge to Nowhere" became a national symbol of wasteful spending.

Murkowski and other lawmakers call the label insulting and note that nearly 3,000 people live in the six-town region.

Julie Hasquet, a spokeswoman for new Alaska Sen. Mark Begich, said critics of the road were confused. "It connects two communities," she said. Begich, a Democrat, supports the road project, as does Republican Gov. Sarah Palin.

A provision in the bill limits the proposed road to emergency use, but some critics in Alaska believe the provision will be waived or weakened once the road is built.

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On the Net:

Information on the bill, S. 22, can be found at <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

National Wildlife Refuge Association: <http://www.refugenet.org/>

Izembek National Wildlife Refuge: <http://izembek.fws.gov/>

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