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Proposed Road in Refuge Raises Fears About Drilling

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COLD BAY, Alaska -- This isolated outpost, where grizzly bears outnumber people and the one-page phone book is dubbed "the yellow page," is fast emerging as a flash point in the nation's debate over drilling.

A plan to construct about 20 miles of road, half of which would be in the wilderness of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, has turned into a heated battle between area residents, who say they need better access to the airport here, and environmentalists, who suspect, without concrete evidence, that the oil industry is secretly behind the effort.

In a state still recovering from the bruising fight over opening the [Arctic National Wildlife Refuge](#) to oil exploration, all eyes have turned to Congress, which is expected to vote during a lame-duck session this month on a land swap that would open the way for road construction.

The road proposal began more than a decade ago as a strictly local concern. Aleut residents of a nearby fishing hamlet sought a single-lane gravel road so they could travel over land to Cold Bay's airport, the only one in the region capable of airlifting sick people to hospitals during unpredictable hurricane-force winds and blinding snows.

Critics see other motives.

"The premise for this road is absurd," said Evan Hirsche, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, which opposes the road as an unprecedented intrusion into a federal preserve. "It 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."

But residents who live on the other side of the refuge, across an inlet, in the 800-person village of King Cove simply point to the wreckage of small planes that failed to reach their narrow gravel airstrip and now litter Mount Dutton, a dormant volcano.

"Go up and look at that graveyard," said Herman "Buddy" Bendixen, 83, an Aleut elder and lifelong resident. "They got sick and couldn't get out."

Without question, the residents of King Cove endure in perilous isolation. Parents forbid teenagers to jog alone, fearing bear attacks. The sun shines fewer than 60 days a year. Access to the village is by air or by sea and is dependent on the weather.

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A decade ago, town officials appealed to Congress for an escape route. Lawmakers rejected the idea of a road but provided \$37 million to buy a hovercraft to shuttle sick residents to safety and to fund other health-care improvements.

But the push for a road continued. To build it, the state needed to acquire 200 acres of land in a narrow strip through the federal wildlife refuge. So the mayor of King Cove and the head of the regional government, the Aleutians East Borough, proposed that the state and native governments swap 61,000 undeveloped acres for the crucial right-of-way controlled by the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#).

The villagers hired high-powered advocates to help them, dipping into a \$2.4 million budget over the past two years to spend \$145,000 on lobbying in Washington and \$136,000 more to fly officials there to push the issue, city records show. The borough spent an additional \$72,000 during that period for lobbying in the state capital.

Their emissary in Alaska was Mark Hickey, a former state transportation commissioner who lobbies for municipal governments and also represents Harbor Enterprise, an oil and gas marketing and distribution company. The villagers also hired Steven Silver, who was the lobbyist for Wasilla when Gov. [Sarah Palin](#) was its mayor, to represent King Cove in Washington.

After Hickey brought local officials to a January 2007 meeting with Palin, the governor sent letters to Alaska's congressional delegation and the federal wildlife agency urging support for the road project.

Congress now has differing Senate and House versions of the land-swap plan included in a much larger land bill awaiting final action.

The campaign has had an impact. During one recent congressional hearing, lawmakers were shown a DVD featuring King Cove resident Seward Brandell, 70, who nearly died trying to travel by boat to get care for pneumonia. Brandell, who retired after 46 years of fishing, said in an interview that escape by sea may mean traveling only about 26 miles. "But some days, that may as well be 10,000," he said.

To critics, the elaborate lobbying and public relations effort seems beyond the means of an area with fewer than 3,000 residents.

As with many Alaska issues, the road raises both hopes and fears regarding oil and gas. The Izembek refuge abuts the North Aleutian Basin, one of the nation's last untapped petroleum reservoirs.

The recent decision to expand offshore drilling has reopened discussion of exploration off the Aleutian peninsula. Borough Mayor Stanley Mack said Shell executives have visited multiple times, and he predicted an enormous natural gas operation in colder waters to the north. King Cove could become the staging site. In preparation, the city has created a football-field-size swath of harbor that could store heavy equipment.

"The only way to get equipment up there from Seattle is by tug and barge. Because of the ice, there's only a short window to deliver freight," Mack said. "This port is open all year round. When the first ice breaks, they don't have to wait for equipment to come all the way from Seattle."

Shell's interest in the area is not academic. The company paid almost \$1 million in 2007 for rights to drill on 33 blocks of state land in the borough. The company has courted local officials, taking them this year to visit offshore facilities in the [Gulf of Mexico](#) and to a conference in Norway.

Shell, which did not respond to requests for comment, has also increased its presence locally. Among other civic involvements, the company designed a second- and third-grade curriculum to teach students about oil and gas development.

"We want to get that into the school now, so that by the time these kids graduate, they'll be ready for the jobs that we hope will be here in 10 to 12 years," Mack said.

The road through Izembek would initially ban commercial traffic, but some think it could one day be used to move workers or equipment between King Cove, with its deep harbor, and Cold Bay, with its airport. Perhaps more important, the road would signal a policy shift in allowing, for the first time, a new public road through a highly protected federal wildlife refuge.

Nicole Whittington-Evans of the [Wilderness Society](#)'s Anchorage office says she sees a plot unfolding similar to what she once saw on Alaska's North Slope: A road is proposed through an environmentally sensitive area, and promises are made that it will be limited to specific purposes. Ten years later, it becomes a public thruway.

Local officials strongly deny having a hidden agenda but acknowledge that economic development is a top local priority. Aleutians East Borough Administrator Robert S. Juettner said the road could one day be a catalyst for change.

"Everyone agrees that's the deal," he said of current plans to keep the Izembek road modest and restricted. "In five, seven years, I don't think people will challenge it. If there's a generational shift, anything is possible."

Hunter John Arkley says he strongly doubts that safety is all that is driving the road's proponents. Arkley spends part of each year in Cold Bay, and on a recent visit to the refuge, he revved his four-wheeler up a steep embankment. Cresting the slope, he spotted the tracks of a bear that he estimated at nine feet tall. On a tree branch, a bald eagle clutched a salmon. Overhead, a flock of emperor geese drifted past. On Izembek Lagoon, hundreds of thousands of sea geese -- almost the entire population of the Pacific black brant -- slurped blades of eelgrass like spaghetti.

"This is the last place on Earth where you can find this," Arkley said.

The [Reagan administration](#) in 1987 allowed Izembek to become the United States' first globally "important" site under an international wetlands convention. And outdoorsmen such as Arkley question why residents would endanger a national treasure.

Kristine Sowl, a staff biologist with the Fish and Wildlife Service in Cold Bay, said there is a reason the state would have to give up so much acreage to bring balance to the proposed swap: Izembek is unique. "This land is of a totally different value," she said. "It's a globally important migration staging area for whole species of birds."

If Congress approves the land swap, road supporters will face another hurdle -- a required environmental review. King Cove Mayor Ernest Weiss predicted that under a Democratic administration, "it will be much tougher" to get approval.

That's a source of hope to Whittington-Evans of the Wilderness Society.

"Over the years, the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife] agency has consistently declared any such road and its construction through the refuge to be incompatible and extremely damaging," she said, "and there has been no change in those findings to this day."

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