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Palin - backed wilderness road passes Senate panel

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- A remote Alaska road supported by Gov. [Sarah Palin](#) cleared a Senate panel Thursday, angering environmentalists who say it is unnecessary.

The road would run through a federal wildlife refuge, linking the fishing village of King Cove, population 800, to an all-weather airport 25 miles north in Cold Bay. The road could cost as much as \$30 million, though federal approval would not include any earmarks to pay for it.

Environmentalists have compared the project to Alaska's infamous "Bridge to Nowhere," a \$400 million federally funded project that would have connected an island with 50 residents to the mainland. Palin, the Republican vice presidential nominee, initially supported the bridge but later killed it.

The bill approved by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Thursday sets up a land swap. The federal government would allow the single-lane gravel road to be built over 206 acres of the 315,000-acre Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, which is located on the tip of the Alaskan peninsula. In exchange, the state would give about 62,000 acres of land to the federal government that would be added to Izembek, and the Alaska Peninsula Wildlife Refuge.

King Cove has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on a lobbyist, public relations and trips to Washington in support of the bill. Local officials argue that the road is needed to get residents emergency medical care. King Cove is only reachable by air and water and is frequently buffeted by storms.

Palin wrote a letter in February 2007 to Alaska Sen. [Ted Stevens](#), saying "The exchange will provide a long needed safe, dependable, and economic access for residents."

Mayor Ernest Weiss, in an e-mail sent to constituents before he boarded a flight back to Alaska from Washington on Thursday, said the bill's passage was "one huge step towards a road."

"There are still hurdles to cross, but this is a VERY exciting day for all of us," the e-mail read.

Environmentalists argue that the proposal is not necessary. In 1998, Congress approved \$37.5

million to pay for a hovercraft and improvements to the town's health clinic.

"Their solution...would harm an internationally important wildlife area," said Evan Hirsche, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. Hundreds of thousands of brants, small sea geese, stop at the refuge during the fall and spring migrations.

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