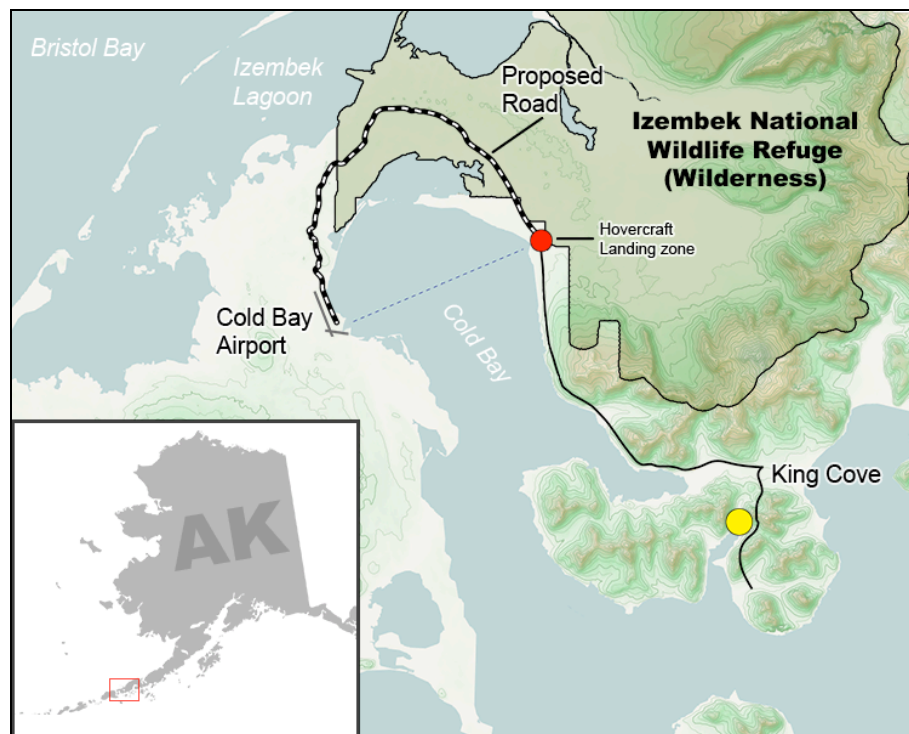


ALASKA'S RED HERRING HIGHWAY

Taxpayers Asked to Foot \$81 Million Bill for Fish-Hauling Road

Why have officials in King Cove, Alaska, been fighting for more than a decade to build a gravel road across the narrow strip of land that separates their 948 residents from Cold Bay (pop. 111)? They'll tell you it is the only way for residents to safely reach Cold Bay's all-weather airport during emergency medical evacuations. They'll tell you that a road is needed...*to save lives*. But a paper trail dating back more than 30 years suggests that the real motivation behind the road has always been...*to haul fish*.



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Three Good Reasons Why Taxpayers Shouldn't Fall for King Cove's Fish Tale

1. Congress already gave the Aleutians East Borough (AEB) \$37.5 million to address King Cove's health and safety needs, allowing them to upgrade their medical facilities and purchase a state-of-the-art hovercraft for a marine link to Cold Bay.
2. Despite the 98-foot hovercraft's 100% success rate in carrying out each of more than 30 medical evacuations, AEB officials halted service in 2010, claiming that the vessel wasn't reliable and that they couldn't afford its high \$1 million annual operational cost. AEB then paid more than twice that amount to operate the same "unreliable" craft in another one of its communities for the purpose of transporting seasonal seafood industry workers. It has since been retired and is up for sale.
3. Until the mid-1990s, Alaskan officials repeatedly stated that the road was intended to quickly transport seafood from King Cove's large salmon cannery to the airport in Cold Bay, where the product could then be shipped for distribution. Only after conservationists pushed back against the road – and well after the last of the area's 11 aviation accidents occurred – did "health and safety" become the overriding justification.

The Fish that Got Away

Because of environmental concerns over constructing a road through Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and congressionally designated Wilderness, Congress provided an alternative solution with the passage of the King Cove Health and Safety Act in 1998. The legislation gave AEB \$37.5 million in taxpayer funds to upgrade King Cove's own medical facilities and to purchase the Suna-X hovercraft – a 98-foot-long, 50-foot-wide vessel with the capacity to carry 50 passengers and 22 tons of freight (including cars, trucks, and an ambulance in case of emergency) from King Cove to Cold Bay in as few as 20 minutes. Starting in February 2007, the hovercraft successfully completed each of the more than 30 medevacs for which it was called upon to shuttle the injured from King Cove to Cold Bay.

In contrast, it would take nearly 2 hours in good conditions to traverse the proposed single-lane gravel road between the two communities. The road would traverse unstable soils and rolling tundra prone to deep snow drifts, icing, high winds, and avalanches. When not completely impassible, these conditions would delay emergency medical care and put lives at even greater risk.

Despite the hovercraft's flawless performance – AEB Mayor Stanley Mack called it a 'life saving machine' – AEB in 2010 permanently halted hovercraft service between King Cove and Cold Bay, citing excessive operating costs of \$1 million per year and reliability problems in inclement weather. Yet, in 2012, AEB installed de-icing equipment and began using the vessel to transport seasonal workers between a new \$64 million, federally funded airport on the uninhabited island of Akun and the Trident Seafood plant in Akutan, another community within the borough. AEB committed to operate the hovercraft along this new route for a period of 20 years and was paying \$2.5 million annually – more than double the price it paid for King Cove-Cold Bay operations. Today, the hovercraft is out of commission and up for sale.

So, why has AEB continued lobbying for a road that would cost taxpayers over \$75 million to build and millions more annually for maintenance when they had a solution to their health and safety needs?

Something Smells Fishy

Numerous references suggest that the motivation behind pursuing the road has always been to expand the seafood industry.

- The City of King Cove's own 1994 resolution pointed out that such a road would link North America's largest salmon cannery in King Cove with one of the State's premier airports at Cold Bay. Notably absent was any reference to the health and safety concerns that the community has since cited as the foremost reason for a road. [*City of King Cove, Resolution 94-26, 5/18/94*]
- In the 1995 release of a state transportation plan, Governor Tony Knowles "said he favored...a 20-mile road between King Cove and Cold Bay on the Alaska Peninsula for transporting salmon to a community with a runway that could handle large planes." [*Daily Sitka Sentinel, 6/7/95*]
- At a 2010 public meeting, an AEB assemblyman – the brother of AEB's Mayor – stated that Peter Pan Seafoods would use the road to transport "fresh product." [*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Izembek EIS Public Scoping Meeting – King Cove, AK, 4/29/10*]
- At a 2011 King Cove celebration, Senator Lisa Murkowski said, "The decades-old push to get the road built between King Cove and the Cold Bay Airport so that we can have greater access for transportation is going to be a critical ingredient in that thriving economic future going out for the next 100 years." [*AEB, In the Loop, 12/2/11*]

Rising to the Surface

In 2009, Congress passed legislation requiring an environmental impact analysis of the Red Herring Highway and giving the Department of the Interior (DOI) the authority to authorize the road if determined to be in the public interest. In December 2013, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell supported the USFWS finding that the road and land transfer should be rejected. The State of Alaska sued over the decision but was rejected by the court in 2015. The State of Alaska and City of King Cove filed a lawsuit shortly thereafter and lost the suit in early September 2015. Now the Alaska delegation is out to pass new legislation authorizing a road (H.R. 218/S. 101). In addition to the standalone legislation, similar provisions could also be included in FY18 appropriations bills or any other legislation going through Congress.

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