



National
Wildlife Refuge
Association

April 5, 2017

The Honorable Tom McClintock, Chair
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
United States House of Representatives
2312 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Colleen Hanabusa, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
United States House of Representatives
422 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Hanabusa, and members of the Subcommittee:

As leaders of the undersigned National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Friends organizations, we stand with the Friends of Alaska NWRs, the Friends of Monomoy NWR, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association in urging you to oppose H.R. 218, H.R. 1157, and any attempts to construct a road through the Izembek NWR or give away any portion of the Monomoy NWR to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Izembek and Monomoy NWRs are under threat from those in Congress who seek to legislate away our public lands, thereby setting dangerous precedents for the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) and undermining our nation's bedrock environmental laws. H.R. 218 would force the Department of the Interior to convey lands within Izembek NWR to the State of Alaska for the construction of a road through congressionally designated wilderness, while H.R. 1157 attempts to adjust Monomoy NWR's western boundary, effectively cutting the refuge in half by giving approximately 4000 refuge acres to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

H.R. 218 and H.R. 1157 are only the latest salvos the Refuge System has sustained in an unending attack from the fringe anti-public lands movement. In 2016, Oregon's Malheur NWR was the site of a deadly armed occupation by radical militants whose core tenet was that federal lands should be turned over to the states. Only a few months later, thousands of acres of the Vieques NWR were almost handed over to Puerto Rico for development. Thanks to swift and passionate public outcry in support of the refuge and our public lands, Vieques NWR remains intact.

Izembek and Monomoy NWRs share many similarities: both contain congressionally designated wilderness, both are critical resources for migratory birds, and both are public lands within National Wildlife Refuge System.

A more sinister connection has brought our Friends organizations together on this letter: Izembek and Monomoy NWRs are both under threat from Congress.

Izembek NWR and H.R. 218

Alaska's Izembek NWR has been threatened for decades, since a proposal was first brought forward in the 1980s to construct an 11-mile road through its designated wilderness. After years of conflict, Congress in 2009 gave the Secretary of the Interior the ability to issue a final public interest determination to either approve or reject the construction of a road through the Refuge. 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.

H.R. 218 has been introduced to force construction of the road regardless of past Environmental Impact Statements, which deemed a road too destructive to wildlife to build, as well as Interior's final determination and

ensuing lawsuit. The proposed road is rooted in commercial interests, would be costly for the American taxpayer, would be unsafe or impassible for much of the year, would devastate refuge habitat and wildlife, and would undermine America's core environmental laws, including the Wilderness Act.

The extensive public record on the Izembek road controversy clearly illustrates the original impetus for the road construction, namely, economic gain. In 1994, a resolution by the Village of King Cove described the "major, positive socioeconomic impact" of a road to link the nation's largest salmon cannery in King Cove with the Cold Bay Airport. During 2011 a visit to King Cove, Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski declared that the road would be "a critical ingredient in that thriving economic future going out the next 100 years."

The narrative has since shifted to that of a public safety need. To address the health and safety of King Cove residents, in 1998 Congress appropriated \$37.5 million to update their medical facilities and fund a marine link to the Cold Bay Airport. With these funds, King Cove acquired state-of-the-art medical facilities and an all-weather hovercraft capable of safely completing the marine crossing between King Cove and Cold Bay in 20 minutes. Despite its perfect record in more than 30 medical emergencies, the hovercraft was retired in 2010 due allegedly to high maintenance costs.

Construction of the road would cost the American taxpayer even more money. Experts believe the road would cost over \$80 million to build and at least \$1 million annually for maintenance. In addition to wasting many millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars, a road through Izembek NWR is simply not practical. The road would be treacherous during much of the Alaska winter when severe storms would create completely impassable road conditions. Even during perfect weather conditions, the drive to the Cold Bay Airport would take two or more hours to complete.

The road impacts to wildlife and their habitat would be catastrophic and irreversible. The Izembek Lagoon is one of only 38 Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance in the United States and provides key habitat and food resources for migratory birds, such as the Pacific black brant. Construction of a road through the Refuge would directly impact the wildlife that the refuge was created to conserve.

Finally, construction of a road through Izembek NWR would undermine at least six bedrock environmental laws, including the Wilderness Act, the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act. This road would set a damaging precedent for Congress to brazenly undermine the laws that have made the United States the world leader in conservation and environmental stewardship.

Monomoy NWR and H.R. 1157

Monomoy NWR protects approximately 8,000 acres of barrier island habitat on the southern tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The Refuge is home to one of the largest common tern nesting colonies on the East Coast and is a critical stopover site for federally-listed migratory bird species, such as the red knot and piping plover. The waters and submerged lands within Monomoy NWR and around the adjacent Town of Chatham also support a vibrant shellfish industry that has existed for hundreds of years.

As the FWS engaged the public in Monomoy NWR's Comprehensive Conservation Plan drafting process, Chatham town officials grew concerned over the future of commercial shellfishing within the refuge and disputed the legality of the Refuge boundary. Despite months of dialogue between the Town and the FWS aimed at reaching a management compromise through a Memorandum of Understanding, negotiations ultimately failed and legislation was introduced to address the boundary dispute.

Federal legislation, such as H.R. 1157, is not an appropriate solution to a local national wildlife refuge issue. Passing this bill will have unintended ramifications felt not only at Monomoy NWR, but across the entire Refuge System. A local, non-legislative solution is the only viable option to address the concerns of Chatham officials

and uphold the integrity of the Refuge System. The Massachusetts Attorney General has announced her intent to sue the FWS over the boundary dispute. If the town and the FWS cannot reach an agreement, then the courts, not Congress, should resolve this controversy.

As refuge Friends organizations from around the nation and territories, we recognize the concerns for the health and safety of King Cove residents and the importance of maintaining Chatham's shellfishing heritage. Yet, we also recognize other solutions to these problems that do not require the dismantling of our National Wildlife Refuge System, and we urge the Congress to pursue alternatives to H.R. 218 and H.R. 1157.

Constructing a road through Izembek NWR places all congressionally designated wilderness within the National Wilderness Preservation System at risk, including our local refuges and other public lands within our own states. Legislating away half of Monomoy NWR would set a dangerous precedent for our Refuge System and would be a major victory for those who seek to weaken protections for our public lands and remove them from federal ownership.

Please oppose H.R. 218, H.R. 1157, and any other attempt to construct a road through Izembek NWR or give away any portion of Monomoy NWR.

Sincerely,

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