



THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON

AUG 13 2014

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Murkowski:

Thank you for your letters, including your most recent dated July 23, 2014, regarding the Department of the Interior's decision of December 23, 2013, declining the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Proposed Land Exchange/Road Corridor.

During my visit to King Cove last year and through my numerous conversations with King Cove residents and their representatives in the months since the decision, I have heard passionate and forceful advocacy for approval of a road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. I sincerely appreciate and share the concerns about public safety and emergency response expressed by advocates of the proposed road.

While the Department stands by the decision and will not reopen the final Record of Decision, I want to reiterate our commitment to continuing to work with you, with the Alaskan communities, and across the relevant Federal agencies to evaluate and develop other transportation improvement options for the residents of King Cove and Cold Bay. We have been actively working to explore other options designed to bolster the public safety and emergency response capabilities available to King Cove, as well as potentially provide economic benefits to the community.

In that regard, we have thoroughly reviewed the submission that King Cove residents made to me in April. It was my hope and my invitation that the King Cove residents would participate in the development of other options to improve transportation. Unfortunately, as your letter of July 23, 2014, points out, the submission makes clear King Cove's position that they believe there are no alternatives to a road through the refuge. Indeed, King Cove recently filed a lawsuit challenging the December 2013 decision and the United States is now defending the decision to deny the road in the Federal District Court.

Before discussing our ongoing work to evaluate other transportation options, I want to underscore that the Department's decision to select a no-action alternative to the proposed land exchange and road through the refuge was not made lightly. It was informed by a thorough and transparent process and extensive analysis of the alternatives related to the proposed land exchange, including the impact a road would have on the vital ecology and Congressionally-designated Wilderness of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. The process included more than 130 meetings with stakeholders, government-to-government consultations, and responses by the agency to all substantive public comments. In furtherance of the general trust relationship

with American Indians and Alaska Natives, we also engaged in formal government-to-government consultation. The decision considered this information as well as the report from the Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs and other information developed as part of the decision-making process regarding the medical evacuation benefits of the proposed road. I have personally devoted substantial time to evaluating the merits of the proposed road, and its alternatives, including our visit to the refuge and the King Cove and Cold Bay communities.

Because of the topography of King Cove and the region's unpredictable weather, it is clear that no single solution would provide the King Cove community with ready access to Cold Bay at all times. Accordingly, I have tasked my Special Assistant for Alaska Affairs, Mr. Pat Pourchot, to work with other agencies and stakeholders to explore possibilities for improved transportation between King Cove and Cold Bay. For example, among the alternatives developed in this public process was one that considered using a ferry to travel to a substantially improved Cold Bay dock. The decision of December 23, 2013, noted that this dock expansion would allow passengers and freight to be loaded and unloaded near water level. The Department is engaged in ongoing and fruitful discussions with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regarding applicable authorities and funding opportunities to facilitate further development of this option as well as other transportation solutions. While our work is not complete, we have made progress in collaboration with the U.S. Army Corps on this option.

In your letter to me of April 2, 2014, you addressed a possible option of expanding the presence of the U.S. Coast Guard in Cold Bay and highlighted the obstacles to implementation of such an option. The medical evacuation missions that the U.S. Coast Guard performs from Cold Bay during the crab harvest seasons are extremely valuable and greatly appreciated by Alaskans and the Nation. While the U.S. Coast Guard performs essential functions, including heroic emergency response and life-saving missions in the area, we agree that for a variety of reasons reliance on an expanded U.S. Coast Guard presence is not the solution. However, potential improvements in aviation access should be on the table among the mix of options available to King Cove residents. For example, the road extension from King Cove to North Terminal may present additional opportunities for safer helicopter services from Cold Bay, including by public or private aviation.

I respect your steadfast commitment to the people of Alaska. As you and I have discussed, the Department has wide-ranging and important activities underway in Alaska, including ongoing work with respect to King Cove. We share interests in many priorities that are important to the State and to the United States as a leader among Arctic nations. Working with the State of Alaska, Congress, Alaska Natives, and key stakeholders to address the diverse and unique issues facing Alaska and the Arctic will continue to be a top priority for me and the Department of the Interior.

Sincerely,


Sally Jewell