

**Questions and Answers about the
Final Environmental Impact Statement
for the proposed
Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Land Exchange /Road Corridor**

February 2013

1. What is the purpose of an environmental impact statement?

An environmental impact statement (EIS) is required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) to evaluate significant Federal projects. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is required to analyze the effects of a proposed project on Federal lands.

2. Why is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service analyzing a proposed land exchange involving wilderness at Izembek National Wildlife Refuge (NWR)?

In the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (the Act), Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior to prepare an EIS to analyze a proposed land exchange between the Service, the State of Alaska, and the King Cove Corporation. In addition, the Act required an analysis of a road corridor through Izembek NWR on wilderness lands (which would be removed from designated wilderness by the exchange) between the communities of Cold Bay and King Cove, Alaska.

3. What is the scope of the EIS?

The EIS evaluates a three-party land exchange that would add approximately 56,000 acres to the Izembek and Alaska Peninsula NWRs, designate approximately 43,000 acres as wilderness, transfer 1,600 acres of refuge lands on Sitkinak Island to the State of Alaska, and transfer an estimated 200-acre, 9-mile corridor through Izembek NWR and Izembek Wilderness to the State, to allow a road to be constructed between the communities of King Cove and Cold Bay.

4. What is the purpose of Congressionally-designated wilderness?

The purposes of the Wilderness Act are to: a) secure an enduring resource of wilderness; b) protect and preserve the wilderness character of areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System (System); c) administer the System for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness; and d) gather and disseminate information regarding the use and enjoyment of wilderness areas.

5. How long has the EIS process taken?

The process has taken approximately three years. The Service conducted public involvement and scoping in spring 2010; developed and analyzed alternatives in 2010 and 2011; released a draft EIS in March 2012 with public involvement during spring 2012; and released the final EIS on

February 5, 2013. A Record of Decision will be completed no earlier than 30 days after publication of the final EIS.

6. Who was involved in development of the EIS?

The project planning team included the Service (lead agency); U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Department of Transportation - Federal Highway Administration - Western Federal Lands Division; State of Alaska; Aleutians East Borough; City of King Cove; King Cove Corporation; the Agdaagux Tribe; and the Belkofski Tribe as formal cooperators. A third-party contractor prepared the EIS under the direction of the Service. The Environmental Protection Agency and Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council also worked with the planning team, though they are not formal cooperators.

7. What other NEPA documents have been prepared prior to this EIS?

The King Cove Health and Safety Act of the Omnibus Consolidated and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1999 (Public Law 105-277) provided the Aleutians East Borough with \$37.5 million to construct a year round marine-road transportation system between the cities of King Cove and Cold Bay, Alaska; build a health clinic; and make airport upgrades. The Army Corps of Engineers prepared a final EIS in December of 2003, which analyzed the effects of a 17.2 mile access road, two hovercraft ramps and terminals located on the northeast corner of Cold Bay and Cross Wind Cove on the west side of Cold Bay, and a hovercraft. The 2003 EIS also discussed a road corridor through Izembek NWR designated wilderness, but a full analysis of the road corridor was not completed because the law stated that a marine-transportation system needed to be analyzed.

8. Does the selection of the “No Action” alternative mean that the proposed exchange has been rejected?

No. The selection of the preferred alternative in the final EIS does not constitute a decision on the proposed exchange. The Service must still publish a Record of Decision no earlier than 30 days after release of the final EIS.

9. What are the wildlife values at Izembek National Wildlife Refuge?

Izembek National Wildlife Refuge is the smallest and one of the most ecologically unique of Alaska’s refuges. Most of the refuge is designated wilderness and home to a diverse array of wildlife species including five species of salmon; furbearers such as wolf, fox and wolverine; and large mammals such as caribou and brown bear. The refuge provides important habitat for Pacific black brant, tundra swans, emperor geese, Steller’s eiders, and a myriad of ducks. The refuge also provides a stop-over area during migration for thousands of shorebirds. Seabirds also use the refuge. For more information about the refuge, visit <http://izembek.fws.gov>.

10. What are the legal requirements regarding approval of the proposed land exchange?

In the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior to prepare an EIS to analyze a proposed land exchange between the Service, the State of Alaska, and the King Cove Corporation. The Service must then publish a Record of Decision no earlier than 30 days after release of the final EIS.

11. Why did the Service choose Alternative 1, the no action alternative, as the preferred alternative?

This alternative was selected because it is believed to best meet refuge purposes and the Service mission. While the proposed land exchange would provide many more acres of land as part of the Refuge System; the habitat values of these lands do not compare with the habitat values of the areas within the proposed road corridors and do not compensate for the effects that locating a road within the Izembek Wilderness would have on wildlife, habitat, and wilderness values of the refuge.

The Izembek Refuge and Alaska Peninsula Refuge would receive over 55,000 acres offered by the State and King Cove Corporation in exchange for de-designating approximately 200 acres of Izembek Refuge Wilderness and transferring it to the State of Alaska for road construction. While the more than 55,000 acres offered contain important wildlife habitat, they do not provide the wildlife diversity of the internationally recognized wetland habitat within the refuge acreage of the Izembek isthmus. Simply exchanging lands will not compensate for the ripple effects on habitat and wildlife due to uses on and beyond the road, nor would new lands provide habitat for all the same species. State lands and private lands adjacent to the refuge to be traded to the Service are under no foreseeable threat. While adding them to the National Wildlife Refuge System should insure long-term protection; this would not compensate for the adverse effects of removing a corridor of land and constructing a road within the narrow Izembek isthmus.

The road is proposed to connect the communities of King Cove and Cold Bay to provide King Cove residents access to emergency medical and other services via the all-weather airport at Cold Bay. To address this same concern, the 1997 King Cove Health and Safety Act authorized funding for a marine link between the communities and improvements to King Cove's air strip and medical clinic. Congress recognized that these funds were to provide emergency health and safety needs in the community as an alternative to a road through the Izembek Refuge and Izembek Wilderness. In 1998 Congress appropriated \$37.5 million for these improvements to: 1) upgrade the medical clinic, 2) improve the King Cove airstrip, and 3) create a transportation link between King Cove and Cold Bay via a single lane, unpaved road from King Cove to a \$10 million hovercraft and terminal. Facilities were constructed and a hovercraft operated between the communities from 2007 to 2010. During that time, the hovercraft successfully completed every medical evacuation asked of it.

Hovercraft service provided by the Aleutians East Borough was suspended in November 2010. In November 2011 the Aleutians East Borough announced that hovercraft service would not resume. Since operations began in 2007, the Aleutians East Borough stated that there were issues with operability and reliable service from Lenard Harbor. Revenue generated by operations did not meet initial projections. The Aleutian East Borough reported the hovercraft

lost \$1 million annually when operating three days a week, and they did not plan to operate it again. The Aleutians East Borough determined that it could not sustain these costs. With no further hovercraft service planned for the community of King Cove, the hovercraft was modified and transferred to Akutan in the Aleutian Islands in 2012 where it is providing a transportation link between the City of Akutan and the Akutan Airport on Akun Island.

In a February 24, 2012, letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Aleutians East Borough stated that it is exploring an aluminum landing craft/passenger ferry to provide a marine-road link between the communities of King Cove and Cold Bay if a land exchange and road corridor is not approved. This letter stated that “It is the fervent hope” of the Aleutians East Borough, the City of King Cove, the King Cove Corporation and the Agdaagux and Belkofski Tribes that the Secretary of the Interior will approve the land exchange. If the Secretary does not approve the land exchange, the Aleutians East Borough “will develop an alternative transportation link between King Cove and Cold Bay. Any alternative we develop will include the utilization of the road to Northeast Corner and associated facilities, now being constructed under the King Cove Health and Safety Act. ... A transportation link the Borough is exploring (and we believe holds promise) is an aluminum landing craft/passenger ferry.” The Borough hopes that this type of a transportation link could be more technically and financially viable than a hovercraft. Thus, a landing craft or other ferry or the hovercraft are potential means of providing emergency access; the economic choices relative to use of these vessels for providing access are the purview of the Aleutians East Borough.

12. Did the project cooperators agree with the Service’s preferred alternative?

During preparation of the draft EIS, the cooperators met more than 100 times. Most of the cooperators have met repeatedly with senior Service and Department of the Interior officials to express their recommendations for a preferred alternative. The identification of Alternative 1 as the preferred alternative in the EIS was made by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service as lead agency and is not preferred by all the cooperators on the project. Appendix J in the final EIS contains recommendations from some of the cooperators about their preferences for other alternatives.