

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contacts:

David Raskin, president of Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges,
davidc.raskin@me.com, 425-209-9009

Patrick Lavin, Senior Alaska Representative, Defenders of Wildlife,
plavin@defenders.com, 907-276-9410

Tim Woody, Alaska Communications Manager, The Wilderness Society,
tim_woody@tw.org, 907-223-2443

Dawnell Smith, communications director, Trustees for Alaska,
dsmith@trustees.org, 907-433-2013

Corey Himrod, Senior Communications Manager, Alaska Wilderness League,
corey@alaskawild.org, 202-266-0426

District Court voids Interior's land exchange deal with King Cove

Ruling comes as big win for wilderness and public lands

A federal District Court decision today voids a land exchange deal between the Interior Department and the King Cove Corporation that attempted to trade away vital wetlands and wilderness to build a road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge.

“The Federal Court decision halts the planned desecration of the Izembek Refuge Wilderness and wildlife and is yet another blow to Interior’s aggressive policy of giving away public lands to serve special interests at the expense of the American people,” **said David C. Raskin, president of Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges.** “This decision is a strong rebuke of the illegal and unethical efforts of the current administration to circumvent decades of legislation and regulations enacted to protect public lands and natural areas from destructive developments and preserve them for the benefit of all Americans.”

Trustees for Alaska filed the lawsuit in January on behalf of nine clients. The suit challenged the land deal, arguing that Interior cannot use the land exchange provision of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act to gut a National Wildlife Refuge and Congressionally designated wilderness, or to circumvent public process, environmental review, and congressional approval.

“The Court’s decision today provides an important and essential check on Interior’s public land giveaway,” **said Katie Strong, senior staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska.** “The agency’s attempt to skirt the law to benefit private or commercial interests disregards the intention of Congress and the purpose of the Refuge System itself.”

The land exchange attempted to trade Refuge and Wilderness lands to make way for a road without using procedures established by Congress in ANILCA. Commercial and private interests have advocated for a road for decades.

The Court agreed with us. It held that Interior failed to explain its decision to enter the Exchange Agreement with King Cove in light of its previous decision that alternatives to a road exist and that a road would cause significant environmental harm. The errors in Interior’s Exchange Agreement were so egregious that the Court vacated the exchange agreement.

GROUP STATEMENTS:

“The Court has seen through the Trump administration’s illegal attempt to trade away the globally-renowned wildlife habitat and Congressionally-designated wilderness lands of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge,” **said Patrick Lavin, senior Alaska representative for Defenders of Wildlife.** “We will not let the administration disregard the rule of law and disrespect our public lands.”

“We are very pleased by the court’s ruling, which highlights the extreme measures the Trump administration is willing to take to transfer public lands into private ownership for special interests and commercial gain,” **said David Krause, public lands conservation specialist at The Wilderness Society.** “Congress established the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and its designated wilderness because of its globally significant ecological resources. The Wilderness Society will continue to ensure that this unique wilderness landscape remains intact, as it is in the public’s best interest to do so.”

“The wilderness values of the Izembek Wildlife Refuge are irreplaceable, and circumventing a public process to build a road right through its heart is characteristic of this administration’s constant catering to private or commercial interests.” **said Kristen Miller, Conservation Director at Alaska Wilderness League.** “We applaud the court’s judgment today. Building a road through federal wilderness would have been a bad deal for taxpayers and a bad deal for the environment, especially when there are other, safer options available.”

“Today’s court decision provides a check and balance against the administration’s blatant attempt to circumvent public process and environmental review,” **said Sarah Greenberger, Senior Vice President, Conservation Policy at National Audubon Society.** “Paving the way for a road through Izembek National Wildlife Refuge would put significant bird populations at risk, particularly the Pacific Brant. Nearly every single one of these birds stops over in this refuge during migration each year. Any attempt to skirt the law and disrupt this vital habitat will be met with our strong opposition.”

"A road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge would be a costly and ineffective use of taxpayer dollars, and would severely damage this important wilderness," **said Alli Harvey, Senior Campaign Representative with the Sierra Club's Our Wild America campaign.** "This deal has been repeatedly studied and consistently rejected for good reason, and we're glad to see the court reject it once again."

"This is a great day! The District Court has recognized the primacy of ANILCA which codified that the Izembek NWR — like all of Alaska’s 16 national wildlife refuges — are 'National Interest Lands' belonging to all Americans and not just the residents of Alaska,” **said Geoffrey Haskett, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association.** “This decision insures that Izembek NWR remains a great part of American’s conservation inheritance. A magnificent wilderness has been protected today by the Court’s decision!”