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INTERIOR:

Greens press Jewell to reject Izembek road ahead of secretary's Alaska trip

Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

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Environmental groups are stepping up pressure on Interior Secretary Sally Jewell to reject a proposed gravel road through an Alaskan wilderness, drawing swift rebuke from Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R), the road's most outspoken supporter.

The Fish and Wildlife Service in February released a final environmental review opposing the road and an associated land swap, arguing the plan would irreparably harm grizzlies, caribou, salmon, shorebirds and waterfowl at Izembek National Wildlife Refuge ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 5).

"The proposed road would be harmful to the Izembek Refuge and Wilderness and the American public," environmental groups' CEOs wrote in a [letter](#) to Jewell on Friday.

"It would fail to provide the emergency medical transportation desired by the people of King Cove, and it would be extremely costly for taxpayers in a time of great financial strain and many pressing national needs."

It was signed by the heads of the Wilderness Society, Defenders of Wildlife, National Wildlife Refuge Association, Natural Resources Defense Council, Alaska Wilderness League, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club, Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges and Wilderness Watch.

Robert Dillon, a spokesman for Murkowski, said that the letter was misleading and most environmentalists have never experienced the turbulent weather at King Cove that makes a road necessary.

More than 40 chapters of Audubon sent a separate [letter](#) to Jewell on Friday urging rejection of the road, arguing that it would harm the Pacific black brant.

The exchange comes weeks before Jewell is scheduled to make her first visit to Alaska as secretary, a trip that will include a stop at King Cove, the small Aleutian village lobbying for the road.

In March, with Murkowski threatening to block Jewell's confirmation, then-Interior Secretary Ken Salazar agreed to send the assistant secretary for Indian Affairs to King Cove to conduct

additional tribal consultations as well as the next secretary to receive written and oral testimony on the medical evacuation benefits of the proposed road.

The 20-mile route through the Izembek wilderness would provide a land route between King Cove and the Cold Bay Airport, which is often inaccessible by plane and boat due to inclement weather, making medical evacuations challenging.

Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Kevin Washburn visited King Cove in late spring and will deliver a report to Jewell on whether and to what extent a road is needed to meet the medical needs of King Cove.

Based on that report and Jewell's trip, the secretary may decide to conduct a supplemental National Environmental Policy Act review before ruling on the road.

In their letter to Jewell, environmentalists urged her to follow the recommendation of the Fish and Wildlife Service, whose final environmental impact statement followed lengthy public input.

The road would be costly and at times impassable because of snow, ice and darkness, they said.

"Furthermore, it would cause significant ecological damage to public land and subsistence resources and set a disturbing precedent for the National Wildlife Refuge System and all lands currently protected under the Wilderness Act," the environmental leaders said. The 1964 Wilderness Act forbids roads.

In addition, federal taxpayers already spent \$37.5 million in 1998 to upgrade medical facilities in King Cove and fund a hovercraft service that successfully performed more than 30 medical evacuations, environmentalists said.

While legislation passed in 2009 by Murkowski stipulates that the Izembek road, if built, would be only for noncommercial use, environmentalists said they fear it could later be opened to support the Peter Pan Seafoods facility at King Cove.

"The Dalton Highway to the north, which was originally built as a limited-access haul road but was later opened to unrestricted use, serves as a cautionary tale that access restrictions can be eroded," they wrote.

They suggested King Cove instead pursue a year-round Coast Guard presence at Cold Bay, recruit a full-time physician for the King Cove medical clinic or explore an all-weather ferry to improve maritime evacuations.

Interior spokeswoman Jessica Kershaw said the agency is reviewing the letter. She said Jewell's Alaska itinerary was still being worked out.

Dillon, Murkowski's spokesman, said the environmentalists' letter was "full of falsehoods," particularly the claim that the Izembek road would be impassable for much of the year.

"Find me one environmentalist who has been to King Cove," Dillon said. "They've been making these claims for 25 years."

Alaska's transportation engineer has said the road would be open 365 days a year, Dillon said.

He also rejected criticism that the road would be funded by federal taxpayers, a claim he said is only half true.

The project is at the top of Alaska's Statewide Transportation Improvement Program budget, which receives a set amount of federal money for the state to use as it pleases. "There is no earmark," Dillon said. "There is no extra funding going to Alaska for this."

Dillon said environmental groups "should be doing back flips" over King Cove's and Alaska's willingness to trade 56,000 acres of state and tribal lands for the 200 acres in the refuge needed to build the road.

Fish and Wildlife said the wilderness acres are worth much more ecologically than the upland acres the state and village are willing to trade.

"The real question is why some lower 48 activists continue to believe that their fellow Americans do not deserve the same access to emergency medical care that they take for granted for their own families," Dillon said in an email.