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Voice of the Times

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A CONSERVATIVE VOICE FOR ALASKANS

Commentary

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King Cove road could save lives

Keep your fingers crossed. Our congressional delegation this week is scheduled to offer a land trade that finally could give the storm-blown Aleutian community of King Cove road access to an all-weather runway at Cold Bay.

Why the need? You can reach King Cove only by sea or air. Squalls packing a gale-force punch regularly churn up 15-foot swells, making travel by boat dangerous. Wind and fog can close the community's airport for days.

Those in most desperate need of medical attention in the village of 800 too often have to wait for the tempests to blow themselves out. The delay can cost lives. Trying to brave the elements to reach Cold Bay 30 miles away can be costly, too. Eleven have died since 1979 trying to reach medical help.

The problem is that any road linking King Cove and Cold Bay must pass through the 303,000-acre Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness. It is a wind-lashed nursery for migratory waterfowl and a sacred talisman for environmentalists and animal protection groups.

A narrow, seven-mile easement is needed to build the proposed single-lane gravel road. It would pass between the Kinzarof and Isembek lagoons, linking to already existing roads, and its use would be tightly restricted. The idea of roads there is not new. There are already something like 40 miles of roadways in the refuge, although you do not hear much about them.

Environmentalists have fought the idea tooth and nail for decades. They fret, they say, that it could set a precedent for development in refuges and they claim the issue is not really about health and safety anyway, but about providing King Cove's fishing interests access to an all-weather airport.

To block the road, they desperately have tried to peddle one unfeasible alternative after another. Millions for an improved clinic. Telemedicine. A hovercraft. A ferry. It is surprising they have not suggested moving the village to Anchorage. In the end, anything in their view is better than a one-lane gravel road that actually could save lives in foul weather.

Congressman Don Young is expected to offer what certainly will be a controversial land swap proposal involving the King Cove Native corporation, the federal government and the state. Despite the hogwash you will be treated to by the left, the question at the core of the ensuing battle in the Democrat-controlled Congress will be painfully simple:

Is a tiny sliver of land at the end of the world worth a human life?

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