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Costly hovercraft at center of Western Alaska controversy

KING COVE: It can't handle huge waves, say those who want a road.

By ALEX deMARBAN
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A \$9 million hovercraft linking two Alaska Peninsula communities will lose hundreds of thousands of dollars each year, but it's well worth the cost, according to some King Cove residents who say they are tired of seeing critically ill and storm-bound relatives die.

**King Cove/Cold Bay hovercraft**

Known as the Suna-X, the hovercraft has the ability to travel over water, mud flats, marshes and relatively flat land.

- **Size:** 93 feet long, 44 feet wide
- **Capacity:** The cabin is equipped with 47 seats and spaces for 120 passengers. The well deck can carry an ambulance, other vehicles and cargo.
- **Crew:** Two to three
- **Speed:** Up to 35 knots
- **Time of proposed eight-mile, one-way trip:** 14 to 18 minutes
- **Power:** Two diesel engines, each rated at 1,200 hp, turn two 6-bladed propellers that move the boat forward. The remaining two engines, rated at 900 hp, power four fans that raise the boat above the surface.
- **Passenger fares:** \$76, one way
- **Freight fares:** Includes vehicles: Sixteen cents per pound, one way
- **Four-wheelers:** Flat rate of \$100, one way, including driver
- **Schedule:** Daily service

Source: Aleutians East Borough

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They say it's not a long-term solution, though.

The Aleutians East Borough began operating the hovercraft in March.

Part of a \$37 million gift approved by Congress in 1998 to make King Cove safer, it's already helped 15 ailing residents reach the Cold Bay airport 25 water miles across the bay.

But the 93-foot boat, which started providing daily passenger service earlier this month, can't handle the huge waves and strong winds that sometimes separate the two communities, King Cove residents say. They want a gravel road carved from their village of 800 to Cold Bay, a community of 90 that's home to the state's third-largest airport.

Problem is, seven miles of the road would slice through a sensitive portion of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, where hundreds of thousands of birds, including the threatened Steller's eider, feed from and among eel grass beds in two lagoons. More than a dozen environmental groups are lined up against the road.

A showdown will take place in Congress sometime next month. A bill introduced by Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, to authorize a land trade among the state, the King Cove Native corporation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is scheduled for a hearing before the House Resources Committee.

SWEETENING THE POT

King Cove leaders have sought a road for decades. Planes can't land there when strong winds swirl and fog envelops the volcanic peaks around the airstrip. Eleven people in need of medical help have died trying to get to Cold Bay since 1979, said retired King Cove fisherman Seward Brandell Sr. One 1980 tragedy took the lives of an injured crabber and three rescuers.



Photo courtesy of Aleutians East Borough

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The hovercraft, known as the Suna-X, began hauling passengers daily between Cold Bay and King Cove earlier this month.

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King Cove, Cold Bay link



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But medical jets can land in Cold Bay even in bad weather.

This time, King Cove hopes to win congressional approval by sweetening the pot with a massive land exchange. The state and the local Native corporation promise to give the refuge more than 61,000 acres in exchange for 206 acres needed for the road.

A June 25 letter from Dale Hall, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, says the chunks of land, mostly on the refuge's northeast side, have significant wilderness value for tundra swans and caribou.

It's not enough, said Nicole Whittington-Evans with The Wilderness Society's Alaska office. The lands aren't adjacent to Izembek and Kinzarof lagoons, so it's not an equal swap, she said.

For one thing, the road will expose the birds, and other migrating animals such as caribou, to fumes, oil spills and other pollution, she said.

Residents say the hovercraft is nice -- it rides smoother than a fishing boat -- but it won't save lives when the winds are really bad, such as more than 50 mph.

Suffering pneumonia in both lungs last April, Brandell, 69, rode in a fishing boat through 12-foot seas and 60-mph winds. It took more than two hours to reach Cold Bay, and then a dangerous leap from the boat's railing to the dock ladder, he said.

But the hovercraft couldn't have handled that weather, Brandell said.

"It is a big help like in a snowstorm or when it's foggy, but wind-wise, a hovercraft just can't do it," he said.

LOSING HALF A MILLION

The hovercraft will lose about \$500,000 a year, borough officials said. To pay for it, the borough will take money from an account it annually injects with about \$1 million to \$2 million collected primarily from fish taxes.

"In the short term we think it's worth it," said Clark Corbridge, Aleutians East Borough assistant administrator. "But we want to look at it in three or four years and see what the people in the borough think about continuing to operate it."

They won't like it, especially when they see their schools losing money, said Della Trumble, president of the King Cove corporation. The road would be less expensive and more reliable, she said.

"We always knew, no matter what, the best link we could have is the road," Trumble said.

Congress approved the hovercraft money -- which also paid for a clinic upgrade and a hovercraft terminal, among other things -- so the community would not need the road through the refuge, said Stan Senner, Audubon Alaska's executive director.

The road will make it easier for hunters to reach the refuge's animals and increase pressure on game resources, he said.

Residents today might try to prevent over-hunting -- road supporters have proposed extending a cable along the road to prevent off-road vehicles from entering the refuge -- but that won't work forever, Senner said.

"The new hovercraft simply hasn't been given a chance," he said.

Trumble, however, said the Aleuts in the area have been good stewards of the environment and animals for thousands of years, and that won't change.

"We'll protect that habitat because we want to continue to benefit from the land," she said.

Find Alex deMarban online at adn.com/contact/ademarban or call 257-4310.

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Comment**Save comment**14 Sunday, August 26, 2007 - 9:54am | **austinswan****King Cove, Cold Bay Link**

The hovercraft will work fine. But it has its limitations. Weatherwise. The road to Cold Bay from King Cove is really the best bet for service to those people. The wildlife is more adaptive than most people. They are really resourceful.

13 Wednesday, August 22, 2007 - 12:40pm | **dishimoto****change in front page layout.**

I read the news every morning and really enjoy it. But you have changed something on the front page. When I try to scroll down to more news, national, world, etc. the multimedia gets in the way and I am unable to scroll past it. Please fix it I miss my news. Thank you very much, Diane Ishimoto from Bethel, Ak

12 Wednesday, August 22, 2007 - 11:00am | **thomas_teseniar2****Enough is Enough Pt II**

I am one of those American

11 Wednesday, August 22, 2007 - 10:54am | **thomas_teseniar2****Enough is Enough**

It is time for organizations like The Wilderness Society, The Sierra Club and the Audubon Society to pack their bags and leave Alaska! When people die because of their arrogant ignorance, they need to start being held accountable. If the delay in the road building is slowed or prohibited because of these Environmental Waco Terrorist, they should be sued! The statement by Nicole Whittington ...

[read more](#)10 Wednesday, August 22, 2007 - 9:22am | **bjodom****Roads or Not Roads**

In our state I have found many marsh lands, identified as refuges for some animal or other, which are crossed or bordered by roads. What is wrong with this picture. How can someone sit back and consider a human life not as important as a refuge which is used seasonally by migrating animals and those who hunt there. Maybe an ice-road would work!

9 Wednesday, August 22, 2007 - 9:21am | **dunawaydmb****King Cove Hovercraft**

Thanks for the balanced article and photo. I have been interested in this a long time. I have been on the Cold Bay dock when it blew so hard I had to worry about being blown off it, let alone try to jump from boat to dock. I have also been stuck in (and out of) King Cove when the winds were too strong to fly. Once I thought a plane might hit our boat masts as it flew from King Cove to Cold Bay ...

[read more](#)8 Wednesday, August 22, 2007 - 8:36am | **debbiegirts****King Cove Hoovercraft**

I have an idea. Since we already know this war will continue between preservation of wildlife vs. preservation of human life, why not just have the military assigned to ferry ailing residents to where they need to go? I mean didn't Senator Ted spend about a gazillion bucks apiece on the F-22s that really aren't needed anyway, in spite of what the warmongers say? Or how about putting AWACS down ...

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