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## **Conservationists Sue Interior Secretary Zinke to Prevent a Road Through the Izembek Wilderness**

***Closed-door deal would destroy internationally significant wildlife habitat and set terrible precedent for national Wilderness system.***

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Today, Wilderness Watch and a coalition of conservation groups filed a lawsuit against Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke for violating the Wilderness Act and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) by signing a land trade agreement with King Cove Native Corporation to allow for a road to be built through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and its designated Wilderness in Alaska. The deal was developed secretly behind closed doors with no public involvement and was signed by Secretary Zinke during the recent government shutdown.

“By signing this corrupt land trade agreement, that would enable construction of a road through the heart of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness, Secretary Zinke has violated his most sacred responsibility to the American people,” said Fran Mauer, a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wildlife biologist and Alaska Chapter Representative with Wilderness Watch.

“Zinke’s action is especially egregious since a marine transport option is feasible and would avoid the irreversible harm of a road in this magnificent wild place. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has determined that the marine transport and related facilities are 99 percent reliable,” explained Mauer. “Exhaustive studies have shown that a road through the Izembek Wilderness would severely impact wildlife and destroy the wilderness character of one of our nation’s most diverse and biologically productive National Wildlife Refuges. Yet Secretary Zinke has chosen to ignore his stewardship responsibilities for our public lands, and in doing so, irreparably violate the Izembek Wilderness.”

Resolutions and statements by King Cove and State of Alaska officials made decades ago confirm that the primary purpose for this proposed road is economic benefit rather than emergency evacuation during inclement weather.

“Make no mistake, if this action stands it will set a terrible precedent for the National Wilderness Preservation System,” claimed George Nickas, executive director of Wilderness Watch. “This action by Zinke marks yet another assault on America’s public lands by the Trump administration that caters exclusively to special economic interests at the expense of the public interest. The Secretary’s actions are an affront to five decades of conservation laws and that’s why we are challenging Zinke’s decision in court to keep the Izembek Wilderness as it is, wild and free of roads.”

Trustees for Alaska is representing the conservation groups in the lawsuit. Other groups joining Wilderness Watch include Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, The Wilderness Society, Alaska Wilderness League, National Wildlife Refuge Association, Sierra Club and the Center for Biological Diversity.

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