



PRESS RELEASE

Alaska Tribes Sue Federal Government Officials for Failing to Provide Safe Transportation Access to Emergency Medical Care

Anchorage, AK – June 4, 2014 – King Cove (Aleut) residents, Alaska tribes and two local governments sued U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and several U.S. government officials in federal court today. The lawsuit was filed because of the Department of Interior’s denial of a road (that was otherwise authorized by Congress) to connect the City of King Cove (one-third Alaska Native descent) with the all-weather Cold Bay Airport. The community has been seeking the road for decades in order to medevac seriously ill or injured patients during the frequent periods of bad weather, which makes crossing Cold Bay and the Pacific Ocean by boat or plane impractical and dangerous. The Secretary refused to allow the construction of a one-lane gravel road for such medevacs, claiming that a landing craft was a sufficient alternative.

“This is about protecting the lives of human beings,” said Della Trumble, spokesperson for the Agdaagux Tribe of King Cove and the King Cove (Native) Corporation. “Secretary Jewell’s decision has violated her trust responsibility to protect the health and well-being of Alaska Natives. We are insulted by the Secretary’s finding that Alaska Natives, who are critically ill or injured, should be required to take a flat-bottom landing craft many miles across dangerous open water to the Cold Bay Airport where they would then be medevaced to an Anchorage hospital. Anyone who has seen newsreel footage of our brave troops landing in Normandy on D-Day knows that the Secretary’s reasoning is greatly flawed and her concern for Alaska Natives is seriously lacking. We had no choice but to sue. We are determined to move forward to protect our people.”

“We have explained the need for the road to Secretary Jewell and why a landing craft is not adequate to cross Cold Bay and the Pacific Ocean in the bad weather, which we frequently experience here,” said Aleutians East Borough (AEB) Mayor Stanley Mack. “We traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with her in late March. She promised us a reply of some sort. We have delayed this litigation for more than four months waiting for that reply, but have heard nothing from Secretary Jewell. This is intolerable, and it seems she does not care about our safety or health. We are very disheartened and insulted by her decision and by her failure to even respond to us.”

AEB Mayor Stanley Mack gave examples of the why a road was needed for emergency situations:

Leff Kenezuroff, an elder of the Native Village of Belkofski and president of the Belkofski Village Corporation, was medevaced from King Cove to Cold Bay four times due to heart attacks. On one of those occasions, planes could not fly because of severe weather, so he was transported across Cold Bay in a crab boat.

“When we got to the Cold Bay dock, I couldn’t climb up the ladder, so they hoisted me up in a crab pot,” said Kenezuroff. “It was terrible.”

More than a year ago, Etta Kuzakin, a lifelong resident of King Cove and president of the Agdaagux Tribe, was medevaced from the remote community by the Coast Guard in harsh weather and 60 knot winds while 34 weeks pregnant.

“Had I not been able to get out of King Cove, I would have hemorrhaged. My baby and I would have died,” said Kuzakin. “I would have had to say goodbye to my husband and two older daughters.”

The King Cove clinic is not equipped to perform many medical procedures, including childbirth and those involving traumatic injuries. Fortunately, Kuzakin made it to at an Anchorage hospital in time and gave birth by cesarean section.

“How can anyone look at our children, our elders and at me, and say, we’re not worth it?” Kuzakin said.

“We deserve to have safe and reliable access to emergency medical care just like other residents in the United States,” said Trumble.

Since the beginning of the year, 11 people have been evacuated from King Cove during medical emergencies following Secretary Jewell’s decision to reject the road and wilderness boundary adjustment. The youngest child was an infant and the oldest patient was 63 years old.

“We’ve been fortunate that we haven’t lost any lives this year during these challenging medevacs,” said King Cove Mayor Henry Mack. “Life is a precious gift. We’re hopeful this lawsuit will correct the injustice done to the people of King Cove.”

The lawsuit seeks a declaration that the Secretary’s decision to adopt the no action alternative and the Record of Decision violates federal law. Further, the legal action seeks a permanent injunction enjoining defendants from applying the no action alternative and the Record of Decision to the plaintiffs or the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and Izembek Wilderness.

The lawsuit names the following defendants: U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, U.S. Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Kevin Washburn, Acting Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks Rachel Jacobson, Director for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) Dan Ashe, Regional Director of Alaska USFWS Geoff Haskett and Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Manager Doug Damberg. Plaintiffs include the Agdaagux Tribe of King Cove, the Native Village of Belkofski, the King Cove Corporation, the Aleutians East Borough, the City of King Cove and residents Etta Kuzakin and Leff Kenezuroff.

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