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June 28, 2013

The Honorable Kevin Washburn
Assistant Secretary - Indian Affairs
MS-4141-MIB
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

I'm writing to reiterate my support for the proposed King Cove Road and land exchange as authorized by P.L. 111-11. As you consider this longstanding issue and report back to Secretary Jewell on your visit, I trust you will place extraordinary emphasis on the health and well-being of Alaska's Native people, something that was grossly disregarded in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) earlier analysis.

The King Cove road issue is truly one of life and death. For too long these Alaskans have battled treacherous conditions, including perilous boat rides and flights, when seeking emergency medical care. Parents should not have to face this avoidable uncertainty when their children fall ill. When they need urgent medical care, pregnant women and sick elders should not have to endure a choppy boat ride only to then face being hoisted up to the dock upon arrival in Cold Bay. These Alaskans are simply asking for reliable access to emergency medical care, something most everyone in the Lower 48 takes for granted.

In recent years, there are a number of examples that illustrate the willingness of Congress and the Obama Administration to act when the safety of Americans is at risk. For example, P.L. 112-100 authorized the building of a bridge across a Wild and Scenic River for both the safety and convenience of those residing on the border of Minnesota and Wisconsin.

More significantly, when two tribes in the State of Washington found themselves in similarly precarious circumstances as King Cove, Congress acted with the full support of the Obama Administration.

Public Law 112-97 transferred hundreds of acres from the National Park Service, including Wilderness, to the Quileute Indian Tribe to allow the tribe to relocate facilities out of a tsunami zone and also settle a boundary dispute.

Public Law 111-323 added hundreds of acres to the Hoh Indian Reservation, and transferred lands from within the Olympic National Park, for the purpose of giving the tribe more suitable property to develop housing outside of a tsunami zone and other areas prone to flooding.

From the initial Congressional hearings through the bill signings, the Obama Administration supported these local solutions to unique problems. The King Cove issue is no different or less worthy of action. Obviously, the laws that created Parks and Wilderness areas were never intended to permanently preclude boundary adjustments or other improvements, especially in matters of life and death. Further, these examples did not provide the federal government with staggering gains in land acquisition. In the case of King Cove, in exchange for 1,806 acres of federal land, the State of Alaska and local Natives would convey 56,393 acres to the Refuge.

In closing, while the USFWS preferred alternative in the Environmental Impact Statement may have been to maintain the status quo for environmental reasons, as you know, the National Environmental Policy Act does not require the choosing of the most environmentally preferred alternative. One thing is for sure; the status quo continues to deny Alaskans basic access to emergency care and will result in further uncertainty and deaths. Bird habitat is not more important than the lives of any American, and I'm afraid that is the practical implication of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service analysis.

Sincerely,



Don Young
Chairman, Subcommittee on Indian
and Alaska Native Affairs