

*Tom Schumann authored this blog post.*

News outlets [report](#) that the Interior Department, reversing a decision made under President Obama, has agreed to a land exchange with an Alaska Native village that would allow construction of a road across a national wildlife refuge that provides important habitat for migratory birds, bears, caribou, and other species. The federal government would cede a 200-acre ribbon through the refuge for a road connecting the village of King Cove to the village of Cold Bay. King Cove and the state of Alaska have long argued that the road is necessary for emergency medical care: Cold Bay has an all-weather airport that can fly patients to hospitals in Anchorage. In exchange, King Cove would cede between 250 and 500 acres of its land to the federal government.

The deal would be far more advantageous to King Cove and Alaska than a previously proposed exchange. In 2009, Congress authorized an exchange of about 200 acres of refuge land for 43,000 acres of state land and 13,000 acres of land owed by the King Cove native corporation, both to be added to federal wilderness. After reviewing the proposal under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Fish and Wildlife Service decided not to carry through with the exchange. It concluded that a road would cause irreparable harm to the refuge's unique habitat, and that other means of transportation between the two villages were not only available, but also safer.

Last summer, the Alaska delegation pushed a [bill](#) through the House of Representatives that would have forced the proposed exchange by exempting it from NEPA review. That bill failed. Interior does not appear to have conducted a NEPA review prior to agreeing to the newly proposed exchange, an oversight likely to result in litigation.