

King Cove Group
Agdaagux Tribe of King Cove & Native Village of Belkofski
King Cove Corporation
City of King Cove & Aleutians East Borough

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July 8, 2014

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

RE: A protest and a prayer

Dear Mr. President:

There was a man in the news recently who spoke on behalf of his cause and our ears perked up when he referred to his advocacy as equal parts protest and prayer. Something deep and true rose up within us at the pairing of those words. They captured so perfectly our purpose in writing to you today. In that moment we decided to make it our mission to find the right words to convince you that our situation requires an audaciousness that is a kind of protest, just as our Aleut ancestors demand our steadfastness as our style of prayer: *We must have this road through a refuge, Mr. President, and provide for our families a life-saving way out of town when medical emergency strikes.*

If you know our cause, then you know that we have been knocking on this door for a long while. We may have been described to you as stubborn and contentious Native Americans and both are true. It is equally true that we have moved legislative and bureaucratic mountains in order to arrive at this moment, and the journey has only strengthened our resolve. We are Aleut Americans and we know a little something about fighting for survival in a beautiful but difficult terrain. We think you do too.

And we're hoping that you meant it when you spoke before the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in mid-June, and declared that we need not give up our culture to be part of the American family. From where you stood in North Dakota, your voice carried all the way to our remote section of Alaskan coastline, a place Secretary Jewell visited last summer, shook our hands and met our children. Just as we were heartened by her words to us then, we are warmed by your words now and your pledge to work with tribal leaders as equal and sovereign partners in ensuring a bright future for all of our children. Still we are left to wonder if we will ever know more than just the warmth of words, but also feel the strong and healing heat of action on our behalf.

The wilderness that we live next to is the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. It became a wilderness as legally defined by Congress without any sovereign-to- sovereign consultation whatsoever. Not a single federal employee gave a thought to our right to public comment or to our foreclosed options as a result of this designation. Eventually we confronted the reality that it was literally going to take an act of Congress in order to have a road from where we live to the airport in Cold Bay. Actual amount of refuge that our gravel road would occupy is 206 acres. Actual size of Izembek is 315,000 acres. Amount of land our state and tribal members have offered in trade as new wilderness is 43,000 acres.

We persevered for decades with the help of our Congressional delegation and the State of Alaska until we got legislation passed. We spent hundreds of thousands of community dollars, attended every public meeting, commented on every environmental study and met every written comment deadline. We hired experts, accrued thousands of airline miles, and talked to any reporter willing to listen. We coaxed as many people as we could to actually come and meet us where we live. Then came the USF&WS finding against us, followed months later by Secretary Jewell's decision to deny our road-and the land exchange. Her news hit us just before Christmas and it was a blow to our communal gut. The wind was knocked out of us and we were a little slow getting up. But nothing less than the lives of people we love are at stake. So we are on our feet, proud and stubborn, audacious and hopeful. Our hopes are on you.

As you said in your speech a few weeks back, examples of sovereign partnership are in historically short supply where the lands of indigenous people are concerned. This point seems especially true in instances where the "public interest" wants one thing and the Native Americans need another. This is an opportunity to push back against that history.

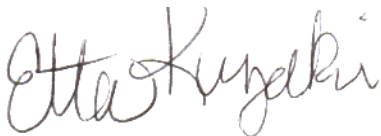
We acknowledge having received access to and attention from your administration. We applaud your decision last summer to create the White House Council on Native American Affairs. We appreciated our recent meeting with your White House Native American Advisor, Jodi Gillette. We were encouraged to be able to meet and work with Department of Interior's Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, Kevin Washburn. For a while it felt like the heat in those rooms was real, a road was surely in our future. Then with December's news, the door slammed in our face and we were left in the cold.

Everyone in this town of 960 wakes up praying that no one in their family will get hurt on a day when the fog will not lift or the wind refuses to lay down. Everyone in this town categorically rejects the notions that our lives are not equal to the lives of geese and swans, or the idea that a minimally used, one lane gravel road will substantially disrupt their migratory lives.

We heard you quote Chief Sitting Bull in your address to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Nation: "Let's put our minds together to see what we can build for our children." Yes, Mr. President let's do that, make a plan for our children. We know there is a way for this road to happen with your help. You can quiet years of Aleut protest in a single moment and be assured that we will lift our voices in songs of praise and gratitude, that on this day in 2014 our President opened the door and welcomed us into the American family. Then will we feel the heat of a strong sun on our beaming faces and we will take that heat into our Native American bones like medicine.

Thank you for listening.

Sincerely,



Etta Kuzakin, President
Agdaagux Tribe of King Cove



Lynn Mack, President
Belkofski Tribal Council



Dean Gould, President
King Cove Corporation
& Agdaagux Tribe Member



Stanley Mack, Mayor
Aleutians East Borough
& Qagan Tayagunin Tribe Member



Henry Mack, Mayor
City of King Cove
& Agdaagux Tribe Member

CC: Senator Lisa Murkowski
Senator Mark Begich
Representative Don Young
Governor Sean Parnell
Secretary Sally Jewell & Assistant Secretary Kevin Washington, U. S. Dept. of Interior
Jodi Gillette, White House Advisor on Native American Affairs
National Congress of American Indians
Alaska Federation of Natives