

The Okefenokee Swamp may be in Georgia, but obviously, for us in northeast Florida, its much closer – easier to visit and more a part of our lives – than Florida’s giant, iconic, ecological marvel, the Everglades.

Over 400,000 acres of the swamp is part of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to provide habitat for a wide variety of wildlife species from alligators to federally protected indigo snakes and red-cockaded woodpeckers. The Okefenokee Swamp is headwaters of the Suwannee River and St. Marys River, and protects sensitive environmental habitats and native plants, including the endemic Okefenokee pitcher plant, *Sarracenia minor var. okefenokeensis* (thanks Ixia member Betsy Harris!).

With that in mind, this week’s newsletter follows up on news about the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge from last week. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently announced a proposal to add approximately 22,000 acres to the acquisition boundary of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. This proposed expansion could preserve the integrity of Okefenokee Trail Ridge from mining that would harm the swamp, conserve wetlands and wildlife habitats, and protect neighboring properties from wildfires.

The Florida Native Plant Society voiced its official opposition to the mining proposal all the way back in spring 2023 when an application was submitted for a mining operation.

From the FNPS letter of concern:

“We believe the proposed mining would have significant hydrologic impacts extending far beyond the mine site and adjacent Okefenokee Swamp and associated Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. Both the St. Marys River and Suwannee River trace their origins to the wetlands of the Okefenokee Swamp system, and the proposed mine would impact both river systems and their floodplains, and the native flora and fauna that depend on them. There is also the potential for the hydrologic impacts to extend into the Osceola National Forest and Pinhook Swamp located south of the Georgia-Florida border.

“The proposed mining permit would allow groundwater withdrawals of up to 1.44 million gallons per day. This is projected to cause groundwater declines of as much as 9 feet underlying the swamp. Projections indicate that one-year post-pumping, groundwater levels under the swamp will still be 1.3 feet lower than pre-pumping levels (Science for Georgia, 2023). Changes of this magnitude are certain to result in significant hydrologic impacts to wetlands as sensitive to groundwater levels as those in the Okefenokee system.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is [now accepting public comment](#) on its proposal to expand the acquisition boundary of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. Please add your voice in support of the expansion and fill out this automated form from Protect Georgia:

<https://protectgeorgia.org/#/421>

It only takes a minute.

If you’d like to personalize your comment and go straight through the USFWS website (always better if you’re willing to), do so here: <https://www.fws.gov/press-release/2024-10/okefenokee-proposed->

[expansion#:~:text=The%20Southeast%20Region%20of%20the%20U.S.%20Fish%20and,Service%20is%20seeking%20public%20input%20on%20the%20proposal](#)

Lastly, a public meeting will be held Tuesday, November 12, 2024, from 6:30 – 8 p.m. at the Charlton County Annex Auditorium, 68 Kingsland Drive, Folkston, Georgia. I will be attending this meeting in person to voice my support for the expansion. If anyone would like to attend with me, I'll be happy to drive from where I live in Fernandina Beach and we can carpool. I'll be leaving around 5:30. If you'd like to drive with me, send me an email at [chaddscott@hotmail.com](mailto:chaddscott@hotmail.com) and we can coordinate.