

## **Okefenokee Swamp and St. Marys River named Among America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2020**

*Mining threatens, fish and wildlife habitat; wetlands; water quality and flow*

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Washington, D.C. –American Rivers today named the Okefenokee Swamp and St. Marys River among *America's Most Endangered Rivers*®, citing the threat titanium mining would pose to the waterways' clean water, wetlands and wildlife habitat. American Rivers and its partners called on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other permitting agencies to deny any proposals that risk the long-term protection of the Okefenokee Swamp and St. Marys River.

“America's Most Endangered Rivers is a call to action,” said Ben Emanuel, Atlanta-based Clean Water Supply Director with American Rivers. “Some places are simply too precious to allow risky mining operations, and the edge of the unique Okefenokee Swamp is one. The Army Corps of Engineers must deny the permit to save this national treasure.”

The annual *America's Most Endangered Rivers* report is a list of rivers at a crossroads, where key decisions in the coming months will determine the rivers' fates. Over the years, the report has helped spur many successes including the removal of outdated dams, the protection of rivers with Wild and Scenic designations, and the prevention of harmful development and pollution.

Rena Ann Peck, Executive Director of Georgia River Network, explains "The Okefenokee Swamp is like the heart of the regional Floridan aquifer system in southeast Georgia and northeast Florida. The life-force of water from the Okefenokee Swamp not only flows into the St. Marys River to the Atlantic Ocean, but also into the Suwannee River to the Gulf of Mexico. Mining on Trail Ridge can draw down the water level of the Okefenokee Swamp and dewater headwater wetlands and tributaries and the rivers they feed, destroying natural habitat for federally listed species and providing dry peat fueling uncontrollable fires."

In 2019, Twin Pines Minerals submitted an initial application to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to operate on 2414-acres, located 1.7 miles from the refuge boundary. Though

Twin Pines submitted a revised application in 2020 in which it slightly reduced the size of the first project area, government agencies expect operations to eventually grow to 12,000-acres, potentially coming within 400-feet of the swamp itself.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency anticipate that “permanent” and “unacceptable” damage could befall the Okefenokee Swamp. The destruction of wetlands and tributaries would also degrade the St. Marys River, which is renowned for its high quality of water and habitat for endangered Atlantic and shortnose sturgeon.

Alex Kearns, Chair of the St. Marys EarthKeepers, states, “The St. Marys is an extraordinarily beautiful and fragile blackwater river that has shaped the history, economy, and culture of our region. It surfaces as a tiny stream known as “River Styx” and flows from the western edge of Trail Ridge, the primordial remnants of a barrier island system, and into the southeastern Okefenokee Swamp. From there it flows south, then east, then north, then east-southeast until finally, after a journey of 125 river-miles, it delivers its unique brew into the Atlantic near St. Marys, GA and Fernandina Beach FL. It is essential, irreplaceable and cherished.”

The nature of heavy mineral sand mining requires freshwater sources, and the most reliable source of millions of gallons of water in southeast Georgia is the Floridan aquifer. Withdrawals of this scale could lower the water table of the Okefenokee Swamp and impact the natural flows of the Suwannee and St. Marys rivers. Groundwater drawdowns could also exacerbate wildfire frequency and intensity and contribute to droughts, thus compounding the impacts of climate change.

“The mining industry has no place on the doorstep of the Okefenokee,” states Christian Hunt, Southeast Representative for Defenders of Wildlife. “The Okefenokee and St. Marys River support local economies and thousands of species because they’ve not been spoiled by the type of development proposed today. Twin Pines cannot be allowed to gamble with the health of these world-renowned resources.”

“The Okefenokee Swamp and St. Marys River define the communities and families of Southeastern Georgia,” adds Alice M. Keyes, VP of Coastal Conservation with One Hundred Miles. “Generations of Georgians have depended on this natural asset for food, jobs, and quality of life. No one corporation should be permitted to destroy that legacy for short-term gain.”

The Okefenokee Swamp has been designated as a National Natural Landmark, a Wetland of International Importance, and a potential UNESCO World Heritage Site. Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is the largest National Wildlife Refuge in the

eastern United States. Unlike the Everglades and Great Dismal Swamp, the function and health of the swamp remains essentially unchanged and has not been compromised by agriculture or industrial development. For this reason, the Okefenokee offers an unparalleled wilderness and paddling experience.

Other rivers in the region listed as most endangered in past years include the Ocklawaha River (2020), Apalachicola River (2016 , 2002, 2000 & 1997), St. Johns River (2008), Altamaha River (2002), Peace River (2004), and Flint River (2016 , 2012, 2000, 1998 & 1996)

## **AMERICA'S MOST ENDANGERED RIVERS® OF 2020**

**#1 Upper Mississippi River** (Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin)

**Threat:** Climate change, poor flood management

**#2 Lower Missouri River** (Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas)

**Threat:** Climate change, poor flood management

**#3 Big Sunflower River** (Mississippi)

**Threat:** Yazoo pumps project

**#4: Puyallup River** (Washington)

**Threat:** Electron Dam

**#5: South Fork Salmon River** (Idaho)

**Threat:** Gold mine

**#6: Menominee River** (Michigan, Wisconsin)

**Threat:** Open pit sulfide mining

**#7: Rapid Creek** (South Dakota)

**Threat:** Gold mining

**#8: Okefenokee Swamp and St Marys River** (Georgia, Florida)

**Threat:** Titanium mining

**#9: Ocklawaha River** (Florida)

**Threat:** Rodman Dam

**#10: Lower Youghiogheny River** (Pennsylvania)

**Threat:** Natural gas development

**River of the Year: Delaware River** (Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Maryland)

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