

OPA Talking Points

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Key messages

- The Okefenokee Swamp holds significant economic, ecological, cultural, and historical value to local communities — and this globally treasured resource should be protected from any mining activity.
- It is critical that elected officials step in and play an important role to protect the Okefenokee Swamp from mining.
- Trail Ridge, the site of Twin Pines' proposed mining operation, is not only ecologically important in and of itself, but also serves as scaffolding for the health of the Okefenokee Swamp.

Ecological health

- Twin Pines, an Alabama-based mining company, is attempting to operate an 8,000-acre heavy mineral sand strip mine at the doorstep of the Okefenokee Swamp, a project that would devastate the ecological health of this iconic natural treasure.
- Twin Pines' proposed mining project would mine at a depth of 50 feet below the ground surface, which is below the level of the Okefenokee Swamp depression and integral to maintaining surface water and groundwater hydrology in this region of southeast Georgia.
- Mining on Trail Ridge could harm and potentially kill threatened and endangered wildlife, including the gopher tortoise, a keystone species, as well as destroy important habitat.
- Light and noise pollution from Twin Pines' proposed mine would also degrade the visitor experience in the neighboring Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness Area, where visitors fish, paddle, camp, and observe wildlife.

Recreational/economic importance

- Local residents depend heavily on the Okefenokee Swamp for jobs, food, and quality of life — visitors from across the world visit the refuge for recreation, birding, camping, and solace.
- At more than 400,000 acres, the Okefenokee Swamp is a National Wilderness Area, the largest National Wildlife Refuge in the eastern United States, a Gold-tier International Dark Sky Park, and a National Natural Landmark, a designation reserved for “the best examples of biological and geological features” in the country.

- With its opportunities for boating, birding, fishing, photography, adventure, and hunting nearby attracting 650,000 visitors a year and supporting more than 700 jobs, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) provides more economic benefit to each of Georgia and Florida than any other NWR.
- The Okefenokee Swamp is home to the headwaters of two recreationally and ecologically significant rivers, the Suwannee and the St. Marys. Due to its proximity to the proposed mining operation, the 120-mile long St. Marys River and its blackwater stream ecosystem is particularly vulnerable to toxic discharge.

Clean Water Act and federal water protections

- We are disappointed that in August 2022, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers retracted its earlier decision guaranteeing Clean Water Act protections to the nearly 400 acres of wetlands on the proposed mining site on Trail Ridge and adjacent to the Okefenokee Swamp.
- The Okefenokee Swamp is one of the greatest remaining natural treasures in the world and deserves to be protected—our hope is that federal agencies step up to protect this iconic place.
- State protections are not sufficient to protect Georgia’s wetlands; they are limited in scope. This underscores the importance of the federal Clean Water Act protections that should be in place for hundreds of acres of wetlands on the site of Twin Pines’ proposed mining project.
- Destroying the wetlands next to the Okefenokee Swamp without first obtaining a federal Clean Water Act permit is unlawful, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has a responsibility to enforce the Clean Water Act.
- The previous administration’s Navigable Waters Protection Rule put communities, businesses, and drinking water at risk. Now that two courts have invalidated the rule, it should not be used when considering the Twin Pines mining proposal.

Immense opposition to the project

- Twin Pines’ proposed mining project has drawn an unprecedented level of opposition—throughout all of the opportunities for public comment to Georgia Environmental Protection Division and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, there have been at least 100,000 comments submitted in opposition to the mining proposal and in support of the Okefenokee Swamp.
- It is not just environmental and conservation organizations who are opposed to Twin Pines’ risky mining project— local communities, former federal and state officials from both sides of the aisle, independent experts and scientists, and faith leaders have spoken out in favor of protecting the iconic Okefenokee Swamp.

- A September 2022 poll shows that 69% of Georgians want Gov. Brian Kemp to take "immediate action" to protect the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge from a proposed mine near its borders.