



2020's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

OKEFENOKEE SWAMP

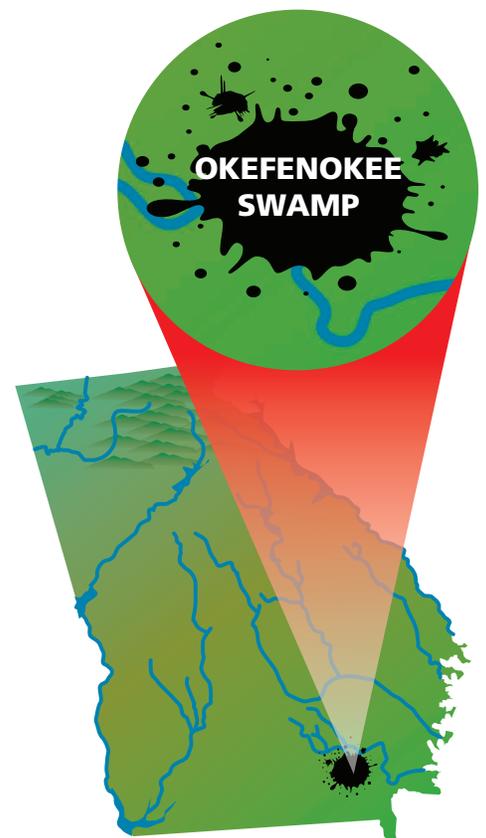
Federal Rule Change Opens Door to Mine Threatening One of Georgia's Natural Wonders

INTRODUCTION:

For nearly two years Twin Pines Minerals, LLC, an Alabama-based mining company, has petitioned the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to secure federal permits allowing the company to destroy extensive wetlands and streams on a 12,000-acre site near the Okefenokee Swamp. The Clean Water Act required such action. During this process, Twin Pines, federal and state agencies, citizens and other stakeholders had the opportunity to submit information and opinions to the Corps in support of or in opposition to the proposed mining operation. Tens of thousands of citizens did so, voicing legitimate concerns about the titanium mine's potential impacts on the Okefenokee. But earlier this year when changes to the Clean Water Act went into effect, those voices were effectively muted. The rule changes removed from federal protection 376 acres of wetlands on the proposed mining site and eliminated the need for Twin Pines to secure federal permits. Now, only Georgia leaders have the ability to stop this dangerous proposal or ensure that if mining takes place, it will be done without harming one of Georgia's seven natural wonders.

THE WATER BODY:

The Okefenokee Swamp is a signature landscape of Georgia. Covering 438,000 acres, it is considered the largest blackwater wetland in North America and virtually all of it—some 630 square miles in Charlton, Ware, and Clinch counties as well as Baker County in Florida—is protected as the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. It is home to a dizzying array of flora and fauna, with more than 600 species of plants and more than 400 species of vertebrates, including 200 varieties of birds and 60 kinds of reptiles. From the swamp flow the St. Marys River to the east, and the fabled Suwannee River to the southwest. These rivers and the swamp are popular tourist and recreation destinations. A U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service report estimated that the National Wildlife Refuge hosts some 650,000 visits annually and generates some \$60 million in revenue annually while creating 750 jobs in Georgia and Florida. In addition to supporting local economies, each year the swamp also





provides ecological services like storm protection, water quality, commercial and recreational fishing habitat and carbon storage that are worth as much as \$125,000,000.

THE DIRT:

When the Trump Administration announced it would repeal and replace a 2015 federal rule defining what streams, rivers, lakes, marshes, wetlands and other water bodies were protected under the Clean Water Act, Georgia Water Coalition members warned of the dangers of weakening those definitions. Now, the new Trump Administration rules, which were supported by Georgia's top legal officials, have come home to roost.

With the rule changes adopted earlier this year, 376 acres of land on the proposed footprint of the Twin Pines mining site that were previously considered "jurisdictional wetlands" are no longer afforded protection under the Clean Water Act.

The federal hurdle removed, if Twin Pines can now secure necessary state permits, mining operations can commence.

That could spell tragedy for the Okefenokee Swamp. The mine is sited along Trail Ridge, a rise of land along the swamp's eastern border that serves as a geological dam, regulating water levels in the swamp. The company plans to dig 5,000 square-foot ditches into the ridge at an average depth of 50 feet in pursuit of titanium and other minerals, and is expected to pump water from the Floridan aquifer—groundwater that likewise helps sustain swamp water levels.

During the now defunct permitting process, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency told the Corps, "there is potential for this project as proposed to cause adverse effects to water quality and...wildlife dependent on aquatic systems."

Likewise, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the 402,000-acre Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, has argued that even slightly lowered water levels in the swamp could have irreversible effects and told the Corps that Twin Pines' studies asserting that no harm would befall the Okefenokee were flawed.

Yet like the 60,000 comment letters that the Corps received from citizens opposed to the mine, these voices have been muted by the rule change.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

With federal oversight removed, it is now up to the state to protect the Okefenokee from this dangerous mining proposal. As Gov. Zell Miller did in the 1990s when DuPont proposed a similar mine near the Okefenokee, Gov. Brian Kemp must take a stand against the mine. At a minimum, before issuing any state permits to Twin Pines, the state should study the potential cumulative impacts of mining on Trail Ridge to ensure that the Okefenokee is not harmed.

Top: With changes to the federal Clean Water Act and the removal of federal permitting oversight, Twin Pines Minerals, LLC, is poised to begin digging for titanium if it can secure necessary state environmental permits. Above: A great egret stalks the shallows of the Okefenokee Swamp. The swamp is home to 200 varieties of birds, including federally protected red cockaded woodpeckers and wood storks. Mining along Trail Ridge could impact water levels within the swamp. Photos by Joseph Kelly/Two Nine Productions



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