

# 2021's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

## OKEFENOKEE SWAMP

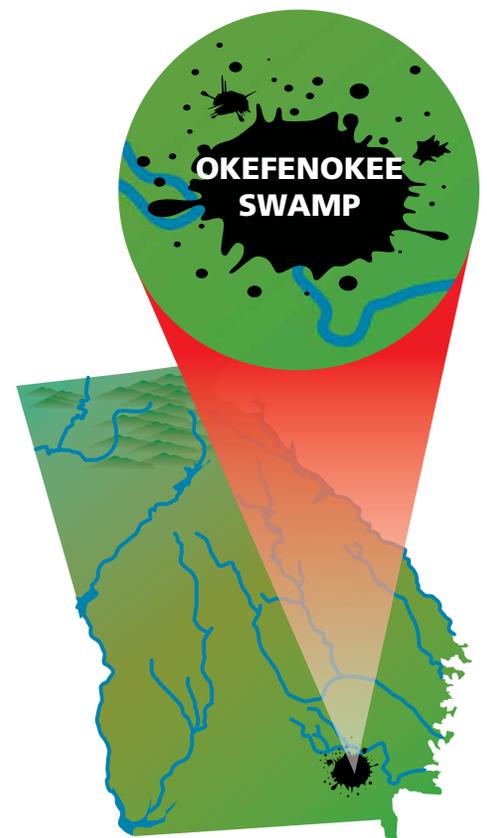
Heavy Mineral Sands Mine Threatens One of Georgia's Natural Wonders

### INTRODUCTION:

In far Southeast Georgia's Charlton County, where the state's panhandle dips toward Florida, Twin Pines Minerals, an Alabama-based mining company, has sought since 2019 to secure necessary permits to plumb the depths of Trail Ridge on the Okefenokee's Swamp's eastern border for heavy mineral sands (primarily titanium) —first with federal authorities and now with Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD). Each time, the authorities have frowned at Twin Pines' proposals, requesting additional scientific investigations to determine whether and to what extent mining would impact the Okefenokee, a treasured National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness Area spanning more than 400,000 acres. In response, Twin Pines has repeatedly scaled back their mining proposal in an effort to avoid what it has called "unacceptable" environmental scrutiny. What was formerly a first mining phase of about 1,200 acres is now a so-called "demonstration project" on about 600 acres. Currently, EPD is reviewing the company's latest round of filings and will soon make a decision about whether the mine will be allowed. Public opposition to the mine has been swift and overwhelming. In the last year, EPD has received more than 40,000 comments and Gov. Brian Kemp's office has received more than 10,000 e-mails and phone calls urging the state to stop the mine and save the swamp.

### 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 Refuge hosts more than 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, the swamp also provides ecological services like storm protection, water quality, commercial and recreational fishing habitat and carbon storage that are annually worth as much as \$125,000,000.

## THE DIRT:

While Twin Pines Minerals' current "demonstration project" would mine 582 acres of land less than four miles from the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, the company controls more than 7,000 adjacent acres, including parcels within 400 feet of the swamp. With tens of thousands of adjacent acres held by other private entities who have expressed interest in leasing their property to mining operations, the Twin Pines project is the proverbial nose of the camel in the tent.

Unfortunately, EPD has signaled it will only review impacts on the 582 acres. The cumulative impacts of multiple mines along Trail Ridge is anyone's guess.

In fact, Twin Pines withdrew its federal permit application when it faced a cumulative impacts analysis. Experts who have reviewed Twin Pines' plans expressed grave concerns about the mine's potential to lower water levels in the swamp.

Such an outcome could alter the unique ecosystem of the swamp leading to more frequent and severe wildfires and impact recreational use of the vast wilderness and thus, the tourism economy that is so important to Charlton, Clinch and Ware counties.

In October 2020, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hydrologist found fault with Twin Pines' study that concluded their operation would have a minimal impact on the swamp. She called the company's conclusions "at a minimum, poor to speculative, and at best unknown."

It remains to be seen whether the company's most recent plans filed with state authorities will be any different. EPD is expected to open these filings for public review in the near future.

Twin Pines plans to dig 50-foot deep pits in Trail Ridge, altering the natural layers of the ridge that regulate groundwater and surface water flows in the swamp. Additionally, the company's plans call for pumping more than one million gallons of water daily from the underlying aquifer, a plan that could lower groundwater levels in the hydrologically-linked swamp.

This specter of uncertainty has been raised in the pursuit of titanium dioxide, a common compound that is processed primarily to create pigment for paint, plastics and paper. One of Georgia's seven natural wonders, the Okefenokee Swamp is the last place you'd want to risk to dig for minerals that are abundantly available elsewhere.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE:

Gov. Brian Kemp must take a stand against the mine, and Georgia's Environmental Protection Division must deny permits for this risky project. State legislators should also pursue measures that permanently protect the swamp from future mining proposals.

*Top: Twin Pines Minerals, LLC, is poised to begin digging if it can secure necessary state environmental permits. The company proposes mining 582 acres along Trail Ridge just east of the swamp. The company controls some 7000 acres, including parcels within 400 feet of the swamp.*



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