



Press Release

For Immediate Release 11/10/2023

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Georgia Conservationists Meet in Waycross to Protect the Okefenokee from Risky Mining Operations

Waycross, GA: The Georgia Water Coalition hosted its Fall Member Meeting in Waycross November 8 - 10, 2023. Conservationists from around the state learned more about the Okefenokee and how to protect it from risky mining operations.

Attendees toured the Okefenokee Swamp Park, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, and the St. Marys River. During the member meeting at South Georgia State College, Georgia Water Coalition members learned about how mining proposals along Trail Ridge threaten the Okefenokee.

“The Okefenokee touches everyone that touches its dark waters,” said Mike Worley, CEO of Georgia Wildlife Federation. “For decades, Georgia Wildlife Federation has helped introduce folks to the Okefenokee. We have worked to protect the Okefenokee from one of the most serious threats to its continued existence, mining along the adjacent Trail Ridge. The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1937 to provide a ‘refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife’--but it has also become a people refuge for so many to reconnect with the natural world and to see and experience the wonders of nature.”

Attendees learned that the Okefenokee Protection Act, HB 71, would provide permanent protections from risky mining along a section of Trail Ridge near the swamp. This sandy area holds deposits of titanium dioxide and other common minerals found in everyday products like paints and sunscreens. Trail Ridge also forms the boundary of the Okefenokee Swamp and is critical to how water flows to the swamp.

“The St. Marys River and its headwaters, the Okefenokee Swamp, are pristine waterways and loved by all locals,” said Emily Floore, St. Marys Riverkeeper. “HB 71 would protect a critical section of Trail Ridge from future mining operations to ensure the continued existence of the Okefenokee Swamp and the ecosystem connected to it. However, what the bill does not mention is that it also protects the St. Marys River. One bill can preserve two beloved Georgia waterways.”

The Okefenokee Protection Act (HB 71) was introduced in January 2023 and is sponsored by over half of the House of Representatives. The Georgia Water Coalition recently recognized the Okefenokee Protection Act's lead sponsor, Representative Darlene Taylor (R-Thomasville) with a Clean 13 Award.

"For many of us, the Okefenokee is part of our identity. We may have different temperaments, talents, and convictions, but we are all Swampers and are defined by it. We don't want to take any risks that may put it in jeopardy," said Josh Howard, Friends of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. "We support the passage of the Okefenokee Protection Act. We urge legislators to protect the Okefenokee for now and for future generations of Georgians and Americans. The risks of mining activities on Trail Ridge for this common mineral are just too great."

"Beyond Trail Ridge, cities and counties in the Suwannee River Basin value the Okefenokee Swamp and the Suwannee River, and are passing resolutions supporting the Okefenokee Swamp and legislation protecting it, including the City of Valdosta and Clinch and Echols Counties." said Suwannee Riverkeeper John S. Quarterman.

People can send a message to their legislators to support the Okefenokee Protection Act (HB 71) at www.protectgeorgia.org/okefenokee.

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About the Georgia Water Coalition:

The Georgia Water Coalition is a consortium of more than 250 conservation and environmental organizations, hunting and fishing groups, businesses, and faith-based organizations that have been working to protect Georgia's water since 2002. Collectively, these organizations represent thousands of Georgians.

Images Available for Download at:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/18UG3DXtad8v-V4NNqipXVHFxPUU4-Bvq?usp=drive link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/18UG3DXtad8v-V4NNqipXVHFxPUU4-Bvq?usp=drive_link)

1. [Kim Bednarek](#), executive director of the Okefenokee Swamp Park welcomes visitors. "*The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge's (NWR) nomination to pursue World Heritage Site recognition is an opportunity to unite the communities of the Okefenokee in a meaningful way. The Okefenokee Swamp Park is humbled to be the non-profit community partner for this historic project,*" said Kim Bednarek, executive director of the Okefenokee Swamp Park. "*Stewardship of the*

Okefenokee NWR to join this iconic list of American landscapes — the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, the Statue of Liberty — will place this Georgia treasure on the international stage, attracting tourism and preservation efforts, and ensuring this natural wonderland is restored for years to come."

2. Michael Lusk, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Manager briefed the Georgia Water Coalition on potential impacts of mining on Trial Ridge to the Okefenokee and St Marys River. "This is clean land. A fully functioning, intact wetland ecosystem on a massive scale, let's try to keep it that way," said Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge manager, Michael Lusk. "Okefenokee is fed by rainwater. It is very clean and very pure. And it forms two rivers, the Suwanee and the St. Marys Rivers."
3. Georgia Water Coalition members tour the Okefenokee Swamp Park by boat, 11/8/2023.
4. Georgia Water Coalition members paddled in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, 11/8/2023.
5. Mike Worley, CEO, Georgia Wildlife Federation welcomes Georgia Water Coalition members at the Okefenokee Swamp Park.