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OKEFENOKEE PROTECTION GARNERS DIVERSE SUPPORT FROM STATE AND LOCAL LEADERS

Over 90 legislators and over 60 communities and leaders sign on to support HB71

Atlanta, GA – As the Georgia General Assembly reconvenes at the Capitol this week to continue work on the 2023-2024 term, many in South Georgia and the conservation community have their eyes and ears on HB 71, a widely supported bill to protect the Okefenokee from mining along the edge of the swamp.

“This legislative session is a critical one for the Okefenokee, the wildlife that calls the refuge home and the communities that rely on a healthy swamp,” said Jennette Gayer, Environment Georgia’s executive director and member of the Georgia Water Coalition (GWC’s) committee to protect the Okefenokee. “We need to move HB 71 and protect this incredible part of our state.”

HB 71 was originally introduced in 2023 by Representative Darlene Taylor (R-Thomasville) and co-sponsored by Ron Stephens (R-Savannah), Jesse Petrea (R-Savannah), Gerald Greene (R-Cuthbert), Bill Hitchens (R-Rincon), and Lee Hawkins (R-Gainesville). As year two of the term begins, the bill has strong bipartisan support with over half of Georgia’s House of Representatives now co-sponsoring the bill.

HB 71 would prohibit mining on Trail Ridge, a geologic formation along the southeast section of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR). Many leading scientists have raised significant concerns that breaching this ridge could significantly impair the Refuge. These scientists are concerned over the use of groundwater in the mining process as well as the potential for mining to make soils in Trail Ridge more porous, allowing more water to flow through it and away from the Okefenokee. Less water reaching the Okefenokee would likely mean lower water levels, which could contribute to more frequent and hotter fires as well as negative effects on the swamp-dependent wildlife.

The legislation also recognizes both the cultural importance and the economic importance of the Refuge. The Okefenokee is one of the last great wild places in Georgia and is formally recognized nationally and internationally as a heritage site of immense value. The Refuge attracts visitors from around the world and provides substantial economic benefits in SE Georgia.

Polling conducted in 2022 by Mason-Dixon Polling of Jacksonville, FL found that 68% of Georgia voters supported permanently protecting the Okefenokee from risky mining operations. This viewpoint is being fortified through over 50 clergy signatures on the “Faith Leaders Support of the Okefenokee” letter and city and county resolutions from St. Mary’s, Homeland, Valdosta, Kingsland, and Waycross,

and Ware, Echols, Clinch, and Dekalb Counties. The support letters and resolutions urge the Governor and General Assembly to protect the integrity of the Okefenokee, as it is seen as one of our state's natural wonders. Nearly 20 clergy took additional action last month by gathering at the Refuge for a prayer vigil to urge the passage of HB 71 in the upcoming legislative session.

Popular sentiment from across the state is that the limited benefit of mining relatively abundant materials from Trail Ridge are not worth the substantial risks of harm to the Okefenokee. HB71 is a rational, well-reasoned piece of legislation that would eliminate future risk to one of Georgia's most iconic natural treasures. The General Assembly should protect for posterity the natural and cultural treasure that is the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

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The Georgia Water Coalition is a diverse coalition of over 200 businesses, non-profits, clubs and more that work together to protect Georgia's amazing water resources. www.gawater.org

