

# 2024's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER



## OKEFENOKEE SWAMP

### State Leaders' Inaction Leaves Natural Wonder at Risk

#### INTRODUCTION

During the past six years, an Alabama-based mining company and its leaders have dropped thousands of dollars into the election coffers of Georgia leaders. During that same time span, Twin Pines Minerals has steadily pushed forward its plans to dig for titanium-bearing minerals on land along Trail Ridge, a sandy rise adjacent to the Okefenokee Swamp in Charlton County. Coincident or not, no legislation protecting the Okefenokee Swamp gained passage during Georgia's recently completed 2024 legislative session. Indeed, despite the fact that a bi-partisan coalition of more than half the House of Representatives sponsored a bill that offered meaningful protections, that bill never even received a vote. Meanwhile the permitting process moves forward and Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD), unmoved by tens of thousands of comments urging them to stop the mine, appears poised to give the mine the green light. If permitted, expert hydrologists warn that mining on Trail Ridge, which plays a role in regulating swamp water levels, will cause more frequent drought conditions in the swamp. The impacts will increase the likelihood of wildfires that threaten neighboring commercial timberlands, decrease recreational use of the swamp's wilderness canoe trails and increase carbon dioxide fluxes to the atmosphere as the swamp's carbon-rich peat dries out and oxidizes.



#### THE WATER BODY

The Okefenokee Swamp is a signature landscape of Georgia and was recently nominated by the Department of Interior as a candidate for inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. 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. The swamp attracts some 800,000 visits annually and swamp tourism spending amounts to \$91.5 million annually. 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 \$4 billion.



An icon of the swamp, the American alligator is found in abundance within the Okefenokee, offering visitors up-close-and-in-person encounters with the ancient reptile.



## THE DIRT

The state's failure to protect the Okefenokee Swamp from mining threats has been baffling. Opposition to Twin Pines Minerals' proposed "demonstration mine" has been overwhelming and from both sides of the political divide.

U.S. Department of Interior Secretary Deb Haaland in 2022 wrote Gov. Brian Kemp urging him to deny permits for the proposed mine, and earlier this year former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich in an op-ed published in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution implored state leaders to take action. Polls have shown that 69 percent of Georgians want Gov. Kemp to take immediate action to protect the swamp, and federal and state agencies have been literally swamped with some 200,000 comments opposing the Twin Pines Minerals mine.

The Okefenokee Protection Act, introduced during the 2023 legislative session and aimed at stopping mining on Trail Ridge adjacent to the swamp, ultimately gained more than 90 sponsors.

The bi-partisan coalition of supporters was more than enough to assure the act's passage in the House of Representatives, but the bill was never granted a vote in the House Natural Resources Committee.

Other measures aimed at protecting the swamp died when Senate leaders intimated that decisions about mining "shouldn't be made by political entities." Other leaders have opposed protections, claiming that prohibiting mining on private lands would be the equivalent of "taking" property rights, despite the fact that local and state governments routinely act in the public interest to dictate what activities can take place on private property.

With inaction on the part of state leaders, the decision about whether to risk the Okefenokee Swamp to acquire common minerals found in abundance elsewhere, now lies solely with EPD.

A 60-day public comment period for the mining permits ended April 9 with more than 70,000 citizens urging the state agency to stop the mine. History suggests EPD will be unmoved.

To date, EPD has disregarded the dire warnings of scientists familiar with the swamp's hydrology and sided with Twin Pines' paid consultants who contend that the mine will not impact the swamp. If permitted, the initial 820-acre mine site will likely be the first of many. Twin Pines owns some 8,000 acres along Trail Ridge.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

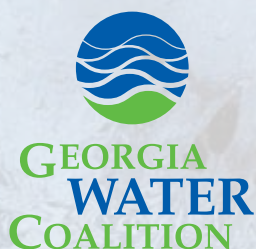
Gov. Brian Kemp must take decisive action to protect the Okefenokee Swamp from mining operations. Permits for the proposed Twin Pines mine should be denied and through legislative action or conservation measures, Trail Ridge should be permanently protected from mining.



Since 2018, an Alabama-based mining company has been waiting to mine at the doorstep of the Okefenokee Swamp, and its leaders have dropped thousands of dollars into the election coffers of Georgia leaders, including Gov. Brian Kemp and key members of the Georgia legislature. During that same time span, Twin Pines Minerals has steadily pushed forward its mining plans. During the most recent General Assembly session, no measures aimed at protecting the Okefenokee Swamp from mining threats gained passage.



Noted for its soaring, Spanish-moss draped cypress trees, the Okefenokee Swamp has been nominated for inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. If so designated, it will join other national natural treasures like the Great Smoky Mountains and Grand Canyon national parks.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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