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A \$300 Million Titanium Mine Proposal Could Reshape Georgia's Swamp Country

Residents split over environmental concerns, company's pledge to bring jobs

By *Cameron McWhirter* [Follow](#) | *Photographs by Malcolm Jackson for The Wall Street Journal*

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FOLKSTON, Ga.—This remote corner of Southeast Georgia is dominated by the Okefenokee, one of the largest swamps in the world and home to myriad wild creatures, including rare birds, fish, snakes, turtles and lots of alligators.

An Alabama-based company's plans to mine titanium dioxide—used commercially as a white pigment—near the Okefenokee has set off a political battle reaching from here to Atlanta and Washington. It is a common mineral, but easier to extract from this area.

The mining company, Twin Pines Minerals LLC, and its supporters, including local politicians of both parties, say that it will bring desperately needed jobs to a poor area and that the mine won't harm the swamp. Environmental groups and leading Democrats, including members of the Biden administration and Sen. Jon Ossoff of Georgia, have blasted the proposal, arguing it could pollute the swamp and harm the creatures who live there.

The prospect of the mine, which Twin Pines Minerals has said would cost up to \$300 million for its initial phase and eventually bring 400 jobs, has engulfed this rural pocket of Georgia.

“We don't mess about our swamp,” said Michael Cook, 28 years old, who has lived near the Okefenokee all his life.



Michael Cook, owner of Submerged Aquatics, a shop in downtown Folkston, Ga.

A recent decision by the U.S. Supreme Court limiting the Clean Water Act's application to private property and wetlands has sparked renewed interest in the mine plan. Justice Samuel Alito, writing for the majority, wrote that the Clean Water Act covers only wetlands with a "continuous surface connection" to navigable waters. The decision likely strengthened the position of the company as its state mining application moves forward, legal observers have said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said it is reviewing the implications of the court's decision, but the state is responsible for issuing a mining permit.

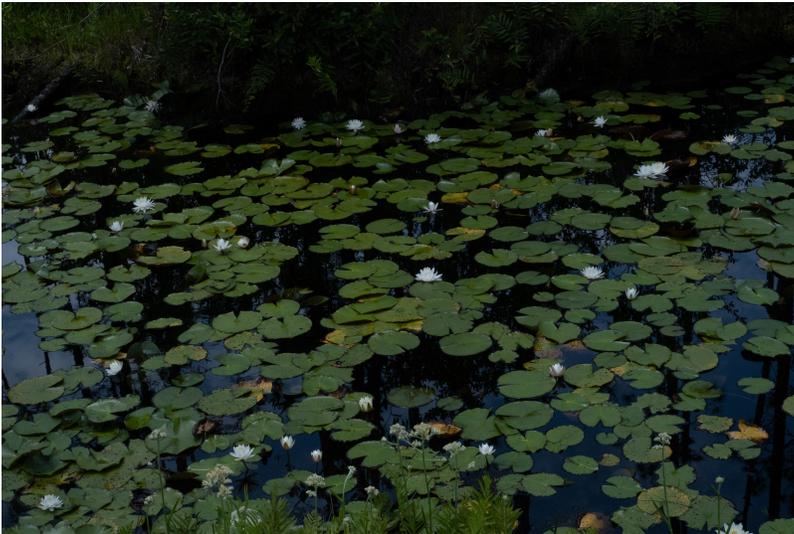
Throughout the region, gray-green Spanish moss hangs on the trees; the air is thick and humid. Folkston, the nearest town, displays a model of a giant alligator in the City Hall foyer. The iced soft drink at the local chicken shack tastes swampy.

Twin Pines bought land near the swamp in hopes of mining titanium dioxide by loading sand onto a conveyor belt, taking it to a nearby plant, extracting the minerals, then returning the sand back to the site. The company argues the mining would be safe and relatively quiet compared with other types of mining. The company's application is now before Georgia's Environmental Protection Division, which is set to rule on a major permit for the mine in a few months, though a decision is expected to invite legal challenges.

Georgia's Republican Gov. Brian Kemp hasn't weighed in. A Kemp spokesman and the state Environmental Protection Division didn't respond to requests seeking comment.

The 407,000-acre Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, established by Congress in 1937 and administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is the largest U.S. wildlife refuge east of the

Mississippi. The vast majority of it sits in southeast Georgia, with a small portion in Florida.



A recent Supreme Court decision limiting the Clean Water Act's protection of wetlands like the Okefenokee has renewed interest in the mine plan.

Twin Pines says its mine would be a boon to Charlton County, which sits in the southeastern corner of Georgia, not far from Jacksonville, Fla. It is home to about 12,500 people, most of them white and poor. Employers include the timber industry, a private prison and a paper-products operation. In the 1990s, DuPont proposed a much larger mine close to the swamp, but the company scuttled that plan amid opposition from environmental groups.

The proposed mine would sit on 582 acres about 3 miles from the Refuge boundary near St. George, an unincorporated community south of Folkston. Twin Pines Minerals says it plans to mine to a maximum depth of 50 feet on its privately held land, which shouldn't impact the swamp's water levels.

Opponents fear the mine would dig far deep under the Trail Ridge, a natural boundary of the swamp, undermining it and possibly causing the swamp—the geologic equivalent of a giant barrier—to drain out and destroy the Okefenokee ecosystem. They also fear the mine would become a much larger project than initially proposed. The company says any expansion would require further multiyear permitting processes.

Any opening of the mine would be years away. The Georgia Environmental Protection Division has released a draft land-use permit for how the mine would operate and had a public comment period. Most commenting, many not from the area, opposed the mine. More regulatory approvals are needed as well as at least two different permits. If the state approves the mine permits, environmental groups and other opponents of the project are preparing to sue in state and possibly federal courts.

“We’ve spent a lot of time and tremendous expense to prove our process through the science to show that our mine will be safe and will protect the Okefenokee and the surrounding environment,” Steve Ingle, Twin Pines Minerals president, said in an interview.



Residents of downtown Folkston are largely in favor of protecting the Okefenokee—but many also want the jobs a mining project would bring.

Numerous environmental groups including the Sierra Club and Defenders of Wildlife have launched campaigns to oppose its approval. Rhett Jackson, an opponent of the mine and professor of water resources at the University of Georgia, said proposed pumping of water out for the proposed mine “will make droughts more frequent and more severe.”

People in Charlton County hold sharply different views on the mine, though all of the residents interviewed for this article said they wanted the Okefenokee protected.

Drew Jones, a county commissioner, said he supported the mine if the company can prove it is safe.

The county has struggled to repair roads and fund schools, and the St. George area is particularly poor, he said. Blocking the mine may be a win for environmentalists, many who don’t live in Charlton County, he added, but it won’t help the daily lives of people here.

“I say bring it on,” Glenda Gowen, 80, owner of a hair salon in Folkston, said. “They’re overstating the environmental concerns.”



Glenda Gowen, center, chatted with visitors to her salon, Styles by Glenda.

Elaine Bailey, 67, fished near the docks at the Refuge on a recent weekday. “The swamp is here for us to protect. It’s one of God’s creations. It would interfere with the creatures of the swamp,” she said, as an alligator floated in the water nearby.

Cook, whose shop sells exotic fish, reptiles and snakes, has loved the swamp his whole life and goes there often.

“We have all kinds of stuff out there that needs to be left alone,” he said. “I’m on the fence. My friends, they are all into it. They want the jobs.”

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