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I-TEAM

# Saving The Swamp: Environmentalists, mining company at odds over dig near Okefenokee

Vic Micolucci, I-Team reporter, anchor

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**FOLKSTON, Ga.** – Imagine having a breathtaking national wildlife refuge right in your backyard, where nature thrives and ecosystems flourish. That’s the story of the Okefenokee Swamp, stretching across the Florida-Georgia line.

The water from the Okefenokee ultimately connects to the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico through rivers and tributaries. Environmentalists, however, say this natural gem could be in danger.

Why? Out-of-state developers have been eyeing the storied slice of wilderness with hopes of mining minerals just outside its borders. The clash between the business owners and nature lovers concerned about the ecosystem’s future has created quite a buzz.

To find out more about the controversy, we headed just north of the Florida-Georgia line, through Folkston and into the mystical Okefenokee Swamp. It’s a hidden gem, teeming with wildlife. We saw our first pair of alligators as we pulled into the parking lot.

For over 6,500 years, the wetland has been a vital part of the ecosystem, the largest blackwater swamp in America, home to a diverse range of species, including gators, birds and bears.



*FILE - The sun sets over water lilies and cypress trees along the remote Red Trail wilderness water trail of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. (AP Photo/Stephen B. Morton, File) (Copyright 2022 The Associated Press. All rights reserved)*

The entrance is merely an hour away from Jacksonville, Florida's most populous city. The stark contrast makes it special for Rev. Antwon Nixon, the pastor of historic Mt. Carmel Baptist Church near the swamp's entrance in Folkston.

"It takes me back to my childhood, those field trips and visits," he said. "But what I cherish most is the tranquility it offers. You feel as free as the animals here."

Despite being a national wildlife preserve, the pristine park faces a looming threat, and it's all about a proposed mining site on higher ground known as Trail Ridge -- a ridge rich in minerals.

An Alabama company called Twin Pines LLC is eyeing titanium and zirconium, two in-demand minerals used in everything from planes to computers. When reached for comment, a public relations manager hired by the company said the owners weren't available for an interview, but they would let us use their informational video and website to understand their side of the story.

In a public video originally posted on July 15, 2022, the company said it would replenish the land with native plants, insisting its approach is environmentally friendly.

The company released a statement on its website:

Twin Pines Minerals, LLC has applied for permits for the purpose of extracting titanium and zirconium from a tract of land, that at its closest point is approximately 2.9 miles southeast of the Okefenokee Refuge. However, we will mine only 582 acres, and at any given time excavate in a very small section of the property (1.5 to 2.5 acres) to a maximum depth of 50 feet, advancing 100 feet per day. We will remove the noted minerals, which make up a tiny fraction of the soils and sand, and then replace the soil to present-day elevations and contours within 20 days. The average time any given portion of the mining pit will be open is only five days.

— *Twin Pines Minerals, LLC*

According to the company, the capital investment will be \$300 million, offering employees about \$60,000 in average annual salary while supporting local businesses throughout the Charlton County area. Twin Pines promised to donate a large portion of valuable undisturbed land from the project area to the state of Georgia to be designated as a conservation area

The plans were submitted in 2019, seeking permits from the state of Georgia. Environmentalists rallied against the operation, with over 160,000 people opposing it. Then in 2020, the Trump administration reduced federal protections, reviving the 577-acre mine proposal.

In 2022, Sen. Jon Ossoff, a Georgia Democrat, stepped in, temporarily blocking the plans when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service raised alarms about potential damage to the swamp.



*FILE - The Red Trail of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge winds through a stand of cypress trees on the way to the Stephen C. Foster State Park. (AP Photo/Stephen B. Morton, File) (Copyright 2022 The Associated Press. All rights reserved)*

Activists call the project a threat.

"No sugarcoating it," said Emily Floore, the St. Marys Riverkeeper. "The mine's location, if it has any impact, will affect the St. Marys River twice, all due to the mine's positioning on what's known as Trail Ridge, the swamp's guardian and the river's protector."

**RELATED: Okefenokee Protection Alliance forms to safeguard the Swamp**

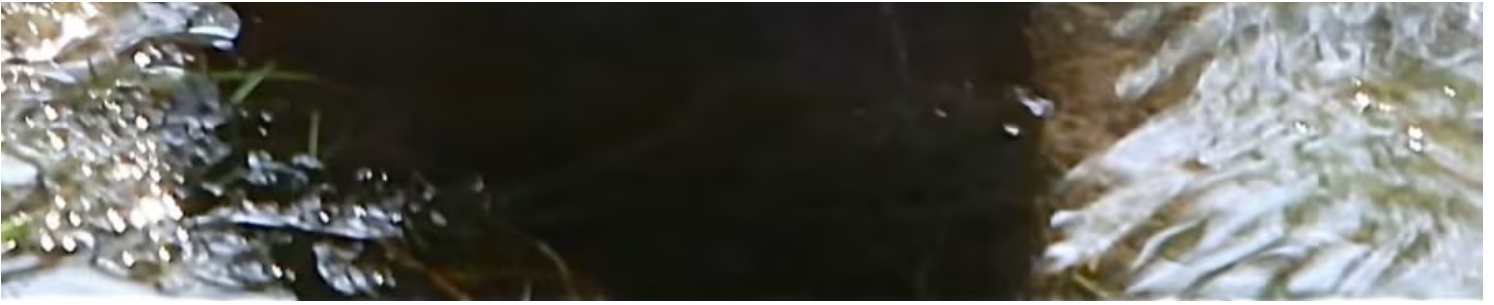
We took a boat tour with some of the swamp's most passionate defenders, like Floore, whose organization works to protect the St. Marys River, which the Okefenokee feeds. She's concerned about the mining company's plan to extract 1.4 million gallons of water from the Floridan aquifer daily, as part of the mining process. This would include drilling two wells into the aquifer, with a maximum pumping output of 1,000 gallons of groundwater each minute. Massive evaporators would get rid of the excess water, keeping used water from being discharged from the project.

**DOCUMENTS: Georgia Environmental Protection Division documents related to Okefenokee Swamp**

If Floore could sit down with the executives of the mining company, what would she tell them?

"Find another place," she said. "That's it. This swamp and this river are treasures. You don't find rivers like the St. Marys River anymore. It's pristine, untouched."





*SnapJAX user "natedawg" shared this photo of an otter feeding in the Okefenokee Swamp. (Submitted)*

The Okefenokee Swamp is home to endangered species and attracts visitors from all over the world. Its freshwater is essential for towns in Georgia and Florida.

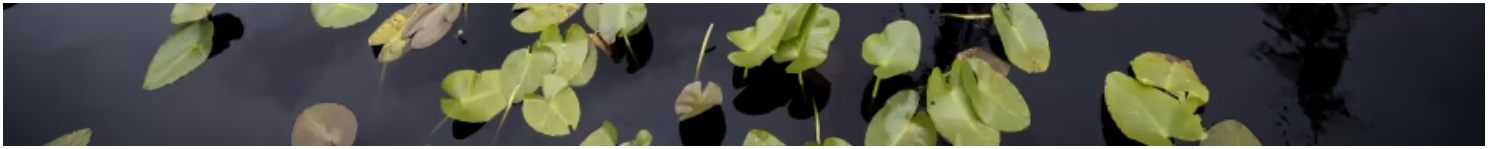
In the 1990s, another company tried to mine the same area for the same minerals. They eventually abandoned their plans after public outcry and donated much of the land for conservation efforts. Twin Pines claims their proposal is environmentally friendly, but Alice Keyes from the conservation group 100 Miles isn't buying it.

"Twin Pines' proposal involves digging a 50-foot pit that's 500 feet long and 100 feet wide, affecting roughly 600 acres," Keyes said. "They plan to remove the topsoil and then put it back. However, the long-term impact could harm the groundwater flows that sustain the Okefenokee Swamp and the St. Marys River."

She believes that even if this project does not get the green light, there will be more attempts in the future. Hence, she's advocating for an Okefenokee Protection Act to ban mining along Trail Ridge. But so far, Georgia lawmakers have shot it down.

"We're not against economic development, jobs and benefits for the community," she pointed out. "But the risks of mining along Trail Ridge are deeply concerning."





FILE - A group of visitors return to Stephen C. Foster State Park after an overnight camping trip on the Red Trail in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. (AP Photo/Stephen B. Morton, File) (Copyright 2022 The Associated Press. All rights reserved)

Back in Folkston, Rev. Nixon hopes more people will visit the swamp and appreciate its beauty. It's right in their backyard, and it needs protection, he said.

"We need more people to come and visit the swamp," he said. "That's the missing piece. If we can make this place as famous as the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone, attracting more visitors, we can boost ecotourism and bring dollars into the community."

Sen. Ossoff is pushing **to make the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge a World Heritage Site**, which could provide more protections for the area.

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division has yet to decide on the Twin Pines proposal. Activists are encouraging supporters to email Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp to oppose allocating mining permits from the EPD to Twin Pines Minerals and support legislation that can protect the Okefenokee for generations to come.

- **COMMENT TO EPD:** Email [twinpines.comment@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:twinpines.comment@dnr.ga.gov).
- **EMAIL KEMP:** <https://garivers.org/okefenokee-comments/#/368/>

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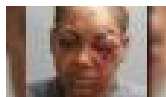


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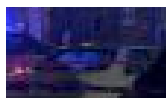
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