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Scientists join to oppose mining near Okefenokee

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DuPont abandoned plans more than two decades ago to mine near the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge after scientists expressed concerns that it could drain the swamp — literally.

Heavy minerals including titanium are mined by digging a pit, sifting the minerals from the sandy soil and backfilling the pit with the sifted soil as crews dig through the mining site.

Scientists believed the stratified layers of soil are what keeps water in the basin-like swamp and backfilling the mixed layers could allow water to leak out of the swamp, lowering water levels.

Opponents are using the same argument now as Twin Pines Minerals continues its efforts to get a permit to mine near the swamp. More than 40 scientists are questioning the research Twin Pines claims shows that mining near the swamp will have no negative impacts.

“As members of the scientific community, we are in no position to opine on the ultimate question — whether the mine is in the best interests to the people of Georgia,” the scientists wrote in an open letter. “However, we are sufficiently familiar with the environmental complexities of the region, including the water system and the geology, that we are compelled to voice our concerns about the environmental impacts of this mine.”

The argument two decades ago and today is there has never been a comprehensive study to show how much of an impact, if any, disturbing the layered soil would have on the refuge.

“Digging up Trail Ridge and then replacing it post mining will mix the existing layered sands, clays, and organic matter,” the scientists wrote. “This makes Trail Ridge more porous and thus more conductive to water, lessening its ability to hold water. This will alter groundwater flows through Trail Ridge and possibly lead to permanently lower water levels in the swamp, depending on the spatial extent of such modification.”

The mining permit also proposes to pump 1.44 million gallons a day for the project, potentially lowering the water table under the swamp by as much as nine feet, they said.

“This aquifer draw-down will create a downward hydraulic gradient from the swamp and will cause a drop in swamp water levels as a result,” they wrote.

The scientists predict wilderness canoe trails will be impassable, tourism will be impacted and the water quality downstream on the St. Marys and Suwannee rivers will be negatively affected through the release of stored chemicals, including toxic heavy metals.

Mining will also increase the fire risk to the swamp and surrounding timber and blueberry farms, and threaten endangered or threatened species, including gopher tortoises, indigo snakes, red cockaded woodpeckers and habitat.

Scientists criticized the studies released by Twin Pines saying they are flawed.

“These studies do not align with established research, and they have not been peer reviewed,” they said.

Until the science proves otherwise, scientists say they remain opposed to mining in the vicinity of the Okefenokee.

“Unless a comprehensive study is performed that takes a hard look at the hydrologic functions of this region, it will be impossible to say that the proposed mine, which would be located less than three miles from the Okefenokee, will not jeopardize the swamp and surrounding areas,” they said. “There is certainly no agreement that the mine will not be harmful – which should be enough to give pause to any mining permits.”

Officials with Twin Pines asked to see the studies that led the scientists to conclude mining could harm the swamp and described the letter as “more hysteria and not an educated perspective.”

Alex Kearns, director of St. Marys Earthkeepers, disagreed with the company’s claims.

“Twin Pines’ President Steve Ingle said, ‘We are interested in seeing the scientific studies behind this group’s collective point of view,’” Kearns said.

“Did they do any?” she asked. “From esteemed universities and institutes across the USA, scientists responded to this latest threat to the Okefenokee with the strength of years of research and experience.”

She questioned Twin Pines claims their studies have been peer reviewed, and asked for the names of the scientists who signed off on the study.

“Unlike Twin Pines ‘experts,’ the scientists were not paid for their insight. They spoke out because they know how profoundly important the Okefenokee Swamp is to the communities around it, the nation, and the world,” Kearns said. “Mr. Ingle continues to demonstrate his complete disregard for anything other than his own bank account.”

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